Tsukumodo Volume 1

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付喪堂骨董店

不思議取り扱います

御堂彰彦
イラスト◆タケシマサトシ

電撃文庫

付喪堂骨董店
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Designed by Toru Suzuki

摂津都和子
Towako Settsu
舞野咲
Saki Maino
来栖刻也
Tokiya Kurusu

In our world there are objects called 'Relics'.

Not antiques or objects of classical art, no: they can be tools with special powers created by mighty ancients or magicians, or objects that have absorbed their owners' grudges or natural spiritual powers after long exposure.

For instance: a stone that brings good luck, a doll whose hair grows night after night, a mirror that shows you how you'll look in the future, a sword that brings ruin to anyone who draws it.

Everybody has most likely heard of such things, as they appear in countless fairy tales and rumors.

Most people consider *Relics* mere fantasies because they have never come across any. Even if a Relic were right before their eyes, they'd fail to notice it. If a mysterious event were to occur, they'd dismiss it as a coincidence.

Some remain unconcerned, while others are certain that such things do not exist.

Regrettably, Relics are real, and more common than people think.

Whether they bring about good or ill fortune depends on the ones who choose to use them.

Chapter 1 - Coincidence

If a coincidence occurs repeatedly, does it become inevitable?

For instance, pretend you're walking in the city and happen to run into someone you know. You haven't arranged to meet beforehand, you don’t share a common destination, nor does he know where you are headed.

In that case, you'd probably mark it down as a coincidence. The second time you run into him, you may find it a funny coincidence; the third time, well, perhaps you'd be surprised by that remarkable string of coincidences.

However, if the number of encounters continues to grow, you might come to think that this person is stalking you.

But running into someone who neither shares nor knows of your destination without any prior arrangement is, and will be, pure coincidence - no matter how many times you come into contact.

However, if you run into someone who knows where you're going and is actively pursuing you, then that's by no means a coincidence.

Which brings me back to my original question:

If a coincidence occurs repeatedly, does it become inevitable?

And my answer is:

The way I see it, a coincidence does not become inevitable no matter how many times it occurs.

Coincidence remains coincidence even if it occurs repeatedly, and inevitability remains inevitable even if it occurs only once.

Coincidence is never going to become inevitability and inevitability is never going to become coincidence.

Coincidence is mere coincidence, inevitability is mere inevitability.

"So what?" you may ask, and you're right.

But there's one thing I can say for sure:

That we met was nothing but pure coincidence.

If I declared a coincidence while swinging my pendulum, it would come true.

"*By chance,* I pick up a winning lottery ticket."

The pendulum gave off a ring.

I found a lottery ticket by chance and won. While it wasn't the first prize, I had no financial problems anymore.

"*By chance,* eighty percent of my answers in the entrance exam happen to be correct."

The pendulum gave off a ring.

I easily passed the multiple choice middle school entrance exam, even though I had hardly studied at all.

"*By chance*, I learn the dark secret of my school."

The pendulum gave off a ring.

By chance, right after entering middle school, I found a list of all the students who had bought their way into the school. After telling the school director about my discovery, I was promised special treatment in exchange for keeping silent. Since then I always got away unpunished even when breaking the rules, and I didn't have to repeat any exams after getting bad marks.

Living my life in this manner, I obtained a variety of things by chance.

But there is a limit to what you can obtain by chance.

It's absolutely impossible to obtain everything.

I could not *by chance* win the heart of that girl who happened to be in my class.

I could not *by chance* win the heart of that girl who happened to sit next to me.

I could not *by chance* win the heart of that girl who happened to be on the school committee with me.

I could not obtain the thing I wanted most by chance.

—I could not win anyone's heart.

"I want to stay friends."

"I don't see you in that way."

That was how my feelings were repeatedly rejected by those to whom I confessed. Their reasons were never concrete, but I could always see the disgust in their eyes.

Back when I was in elementary school, I feared nothing and made no pretense of my feelings. By the time that I noticed the results of my actions, I found myself alone.

There were also times when I wondered if the problem was my looks, my personality or something else. But there were lots of guys who succeeded in winning girls' hearts, no matter how ugly they looked or how bad their personalities were.

Whether it be inner beauty or outer beauty, it was not uncommon to see someone with plenty of shortcomings and wonder why such a person was able to date someone.

At the end of the day, I'm the one at fault. I'm different by birth.

With these thoughts, I was about to give up on love.

In middle school I took care not to make the same mistake again and suppressed my true feelings. I also changed the way I spoke, and in dreariness, I let time go by without confessing my feelings to anyone.

But in the end, I couldn't endure being alone. I could not give up so easily.

So I started pondering:

How could I win someone's heart?

How could I win someone's heart by chance?

And then I begged, oh how I begged.

To meet someone of the same mindset *by chance*.

Shortly thereafter, I met a girl called Miki Kano by chance.

She was the same kind of person. She had the same goals. She was one of the very few kindred spirits I had found among the vast throngs of people in the world.

We were attracted by each other and came together.

This, and only this, was inevitable.

I had finally managed to obtain what I wanted most—or so I thought.

But time went by and our bonds were cut. By her.

I felt betrayed. There was no envy or any such ugly feeling.

It was a much more pure and sublime feeling that she had betrayed.

And the day she betrayed me, she fell on some railroad tracks while going home and was run over by a train —— *by chance*.

Until that day, I had caused coincidence without losing my rationality.

Until that day, I had kept a healthy distance from coincidence.

Until that day, I had only used coincidence to make my life a little easier.

But only until that day.

That day truly marked a turning point for me.

I changed after that day.

After the day that I caused a murderous accident—

"Do you have some kind of good luck charm?"

"A good luck charm?"

"Yes, a good friend of mine was recently in a traffic accident... so I thought I'd buy him a lucky charm."

"I see. How about this article?"

"This?"

"Yes. This is a doll that enables you to transfer your ill luck to someone else. Insert a strand of someone's hair into this doll and if your friend were going to die, the owner of the strand will die in his place."

"Um... do you have anything a little less weird...?"

"I see. Then how about this?"

"This?"

"Yes. This is a pendant that lets you use your luck in advance. Your friend may be able to avoid his death. In exchange, once his luck is used up, the rest of his life will proceed without any positive events whatsoever."

"Um... do you have anything a little less odd...?"

"I see. Then how about this?"

"This?"

"Yes. This is a ring that inverts the future. If your friend were fated to die, he will instead survive. On the other hand, if were going to live, he will die instead."

"Um... do you have anything a little less creepy...?"

"I see. Then..." she started and pointed outside, " There's a shrine over there. I recommend buying a charm there."

After receiving a 100-yen stone as a welcome gift, the

completely put-off customer—who looked like a middle school student—left the store.

Having waited for her to leave, I then entered the rather dim shop. Not as a customer, though.

This small and quaint shop, the "Tsukumodo Antique Shop (FAKE)," was where I worked part-time.

"Tokiya," whispered Saki Maino upon noticing me. She was the shop assistant who had been suggesting products a few moments ago.

While she had pale hair that reached down to the middle of her back and shone silver in the light, as well as clear white skin, she was clad entirely in black. She wore a black shirt with frills, a long black skirt and black boots. She was rather short and so slender that she looked as if she might break if embraced. Not that I planned on actually embracing her, of course.

She was sixteen and thus one year my junior. While she looked her age, her demeanor made her seem a little more mature. A brilliant smile like a blooming flower, as the meaning of her name would suggest, most definitely failed to adorn her face; instead she was perfectly expressionless as if to deny the saying "nomen est omen"[1].

"You don't even want to sell anything, do you?"

"Why would you think so? You should have seen my sales talk just now."

"I'm asking *because* I've seen it!"

"Then everything should be clear, right? Employing a wide article knowledge to select the article that best matches the customer's needs and then professionally introducing him to it. The basics of customer service."

"But you haven't actually sold anything, now have you?"

"Because we unfortunately did not carry the article the customer was looking for. It was in no way my fault."

"And in the end you even told her to visit a shrine."

"The article could not be found here, so I introduced an alternative to suit the customer's needs, even though I redirected her to a competitor. I did so because the customer always has top priority. I even threw in a power stone for free. So yes, I couldn't sell anything this time, but such a happy customer is bound to visit us again."

"You won't see that girl ever again, you know? She's obviously gotten the creeps."

"The creeps? Why so?"

"Because you made it look like all we sell is cursed stuff!"

"But they're fakes, so there is nothing to worry about."

"You should have told *her* that!"

"...How careless of me," Saki whispered bitterly in shock while putting her hands on the counter, "I would have committed a fraud if she had bought anything believing that it's real. I clearly made a mistake again."

Listen to me for Christ's sake. And anyway, you consider that *the problem? Before worrying about authenticity, you should think about whether it's a good idea to recommend cursed stuff to a customer who wishes to buy a luck charm... In the first place, don't start off with the premise that her friend is going to die!*

While blurting out some remarks in my thoughts, I pressed the button on the register to print today's sales. The slip popped out just a few millimeters.

The short length was proof that we were not selling.

A look at the cash register slip revealed that our sales that day came down to a perfect zero.

Well, nothing to make a fuss about.

The shop was located in a dark and lifeless side street, and the few customers that came by from time to time had to deal with Saki's "customer service", but the biggest problem of all was the merchandise we carried.

Since the name was "Tsukumodo Antique Shop", the shelves did contain stuff like old Japanese glasses, Western crockery, or tube radios and pocket lamps.

But that was just a small portion.

Most space was occupied by stuff like dolls, pendants, rings, and other miscellaneous goods that had nothing to do with the antiques in the shop's name whatsoever.

Of course they didn't possess any special powers as Saki's explanations had suggested. They were only fakes of things that appear in tales and rumors.

To be more exact, the articles in the shelves were fakes the owner of this shop had purchased, believing they were real, which were now put up for sale for a tiny fraction of their original prices.

The "FAKE" part in the shop name was likely to originate from that fact.

Incidentally, the Tsukumodo Antique Shop apparently had a sister shop. The "FAKE" was probably appended to distinguish them.

"By the way, where's Towako-san?" I asked because I didn't see the owner, Towako Settsu, anywhere.

"Making purchases. She said she won't be back for a week."

"And I bet we'll get to see yet another fake."

Towako-san's interests are self-explanatory, seeing that she was away seeking the real counterparts of the articles here. Well, she pretty much never got her hands on real ones, though. I was still wondering whether or not I should be happy that she found as much as a blind man would.

"Tokiya, hurry up and get dressed. I want to change shifts and do the shopping for today's dinner."

Unlike me, Saki didn't just work here, but also called it her home, so she had to do all the housework like cooking, washing and tidying as well as her normal shop work.

"Got it," I said and headed toward the room in the back after changing the hold on my bag. "Ah, almost forgot," I added while passing her by, "The basics of serving a customer is not only putting your article knowledge on display, you know?"

"What else is there?"

"A smile!" I taught her while pushing up the corners of my mouth.

"That goes without saying, doesn't it?" Saki answered expressionlessly.

♦

I used to hate coincidence.

I considered them to be ambiguous, uncertain and unsure.

I hated those coincidences that were brought forth by "god" or "fate" or whatever they are called—those coincidences you cannot avoid whatever you do, however strong your will is and however hard you wish.

No, perhaps you can say that coincidence hated *me* first.

After all I was betrayed before I was even born—by a certain coincidence a baby being born does have no influence on.

Therefore, I hated coincidence.

Therefore, I *detested* coincidence.

And yet... it was but a mere coincidence that I obtained *it*.

On the way back from school I found a wallet by chance. There were only 5000 yen in it, but that was a nice little sum for the elementary schooler I was.

I didn't think a second about returning it to its owner.

I had been on edge that day, so this was a heaven-sent opportunity to relieve some stress. I pulled out the five 1000-yen notes, threw the wallet away and went to a video arcade.

I was all ready to enjoy myself and squander my money, but funnily enough I was on a roll that day and still had more than 3000 yen on hand when I started thinking about going home.

I didn't want to carry the money I picked up back home. If my parents had found out I had got so much coin before getting my allowance then there would be questions.

Eating something before dinner wasn't an option, either. I thought about buying something, but I couldn't decide on anything.

When I walked along a back street after leaving the game arcade, still wavering what to do with the money, a certain shop caught my eye.

The building was so small and old that, at first glance, I thought it had gone bust.

Still, as though attracted by something I entered the shop.

The interior was as old as it looked from the outside and there were no articles on the shelves that looked like actual articles.

Behind the counter sat a woman.

I don't remember what she was like. Well, there are some vague impressions I remember. For instance, she was about in her late twenties, looked somewhat listless and wore something like a long black dress. But all these memories are ambiguous—as though veiled in mist. Most of all I can't recall her face.

The single thing I remember vividly is that she was gazing at a small pendulum she held aloft as if in a trance.

After a while she noticed me and asked, "Are you looking for something?"

Only then I finally assured myself that you could actually buy something there.

Half out of interest, half out of spontaneity I asked, "Do you have something interesting?"

"I do have something uncommon," she replied and showed the pendulum she was holding in her hand. "I was just wondering if someone might drop in by chance."

It was a simple pendulum consisting of a chain and a sphere—it was neither interesting nor did it look uncommon.

"Is this supposed to be a keychain or something?"

"It's up to you what you use it for. But that's not how you would normally use it, is it?"

I had no idea what one would normally use a pendulum for.

"You use it like this!" she said and held the small pendulum aloft by its chain. The sphere started to swing left and right in a regular rhythm.

Well, that's how you use a pendulum. Sure.

"Then you say the following," added the woman with a smile as if she had read my mind, "*By chance*, this boy finds a wallet."

"?"

Does she know that I found one?

While I was sure she couldn't know, my conscience pushed me back—and made my foot bump into something.

I unwittingly dropped my gaze just to find a wallet lying by my feet.

When I picked it up, the woman, still smiling, said, "Aren't you lucky to find a wallet by chance?"

I thought I heard a bright ring at that moment.

"This is a *Relic* that can create coincidences. Its name is *Pendolo*."

"*Relic*? *Pendolo*?"

A "relic" can mean antique or item of classical art—I got the idea. "Pendolo", on the other hand, probably was "Pendulum" in some other language.

The woman, however, shook her head slowly, indicating that I was wrong.

"I'm not talking about antiques and art objects. What I mean are tools with special abilities created by mighty ancients or

magicians, and objects that have absorbed their owner's grudge or natural spiritual powers. Things like a stone that brings ill luck, a cursed voodoo doll or a triple mirror that shows how you're going to die. I believe you've heard of many of them, and this coincidence-calling pendulum belongs to them. So? What do you say? It's yours for however much you have on hand."

It's not that I believed her. I even doubted if she was in her right mind. But it was just money I had picked up anyway, and I couldn't take it home. On top of that, I had entered the shop because I wanted to buy something, so there was nothing that stopped me from spending it.

Nice to have as an accessory for my bag, I just thought.

"But why would you give this to me...?"

"It's not my decision. The Relic has chosen its owner. I am merely a go-between."

"That makes me wonder even more—why me?"

"Mmm..." she grumbled and, shortly after, flashed a mischievous smile, "By chance, perhaps?"

I paid with the remaining 3000 yen I had and a 1000 yen note that was in the wallet I had just picked up, and obtained the Pendolo.

Strangely enough, I had the feeling it had been mine all along.

"A pendulum that can call forth coincidences..."

Not that I believed her—elementary schoolers these days aren't naive enough as to believe such nonsense. Nevertheless, I found myself imitating what she did.

"*By chance*, I find a wallet," I said and couldn't help laughing at myself.

What am I doing? No way you can actually make coincidences happen at will. I guess I'm best off using it as an accessory.

I took a step toward the entrance to go home, when I suddenly kicked something away.

A ring echoed throughout the shop.

"!"

Impossible...!

Even so I slowly dropped my gaze... and found a red wallet.

"What the..."

I looked up at the saleswoman. She was smiling. Calmly. As if nothing had happened.

Put off by this, I rushed out of the shop.

In the very last moment, her words caught up with me:

"Keep one thing in mind: the *Pendolo* can only call forth coincidences. Should you try to summon a certainty, you will create a conflict. It's up to you how you use it!"

Unable to let go of the pendulum even while considering it eerie, I kept wavering what to do until sunset.

In the end, I went home without throwing it away and got a scolding from my mother for coming too late.

"What time do you think it is?!"

Only seven o'clock. Nothing against curfews, but that's way too early.

I told her something along these lines, to what she responded, "I'm worried about you, you know? You just..."

I couldn't stand her jabbering anymore, so, ignoring her, I sped up the stairway. She didn't let this happen, however, and

held me by the arm on the way. I tried shaking her off, but I was too weak. Instead, I whispered without thinking:

"*By chance*, mom falls down the stairs."

I don't know why I said this.

Hadn't I believed that nothing would happen?

"Eh? I didn't quite hear you. What did you say...?"

The next moment, her tight grip loosened and her hand slipped away.

A ring resounded.

The ring was, however, drowned by a much louder sound of something rolling down the stairs. It goes without saying *what* had fallen down. My mother.

That day, my mother suffered a sprain that took a week to heal.

On the next day, I visited the shop once more.

To complain of receiving an original instead of a fake sounds like a bad joke, but the pendulum had gotten too scary for my taste, so I wanted to return it.

However, the shop wasn't there anymore.

No, to be exact, the shop was still there.

But the shop assistant who had sold the Relic to me was nowhere to be seen. Furthermore, the shop's interior looked completely different than the day before.

Had it all been a dream? But in my very hands I held the proof that it was not. Along with her words:

—It's up to you how you use it!

Exactly. As long as I don't use it the wrong way!

I didn't return my coincidence-summoning Relic. But I didn't throw it away, either.

In the end, I failed to resist the temptation to tame and take advantage of coincidence, which I had used to hate.

I haven't visited the shop since. I even forgot where it was.

What was its name, anyway?

A siren woke me from my memories of the past.

From the footbridge I stood on, one could see the devastated car that had crashed into a power pole and blood splatters. The

crash site was circled by police cars and an ambulance, and farther off by a bunch of onlookers.

This was my second murderous accident.

But it was her own fault. She shouldn't have made fun of my feelings for Miki.

Why, thanks to me she was able to suffer the same as her beloved boyfriend. She must have wished for this to happen. Besides, she can count herself lucky that she didn't have to realize that she had been betrayed to the very end.

She should actually be grateful.

...Bad memories had come to mind.

I didn't want to recall Miki anymore.

She, who was the same as me.

She, who stopped being the same as me.

She, who is not needed anymore.

She, who is not here anymore.

I fiercely shook my head to shake off these thoughts.

Many times I had tried to forget her, but I would always keep recalling her. I was irritated at myself for being so wimpy .

Please, someone overwrite my heart.

In fact, I'd had in mind to stay by myself for a little longer, but I couldn't seem to put up with it.

I took the pendulum out of my pocket.

"*By chance*, I meet someone of the same..." I started, but then I paused.

I mustn't rely on something so uncertain as the "same mind". This has already failed once. Feelings can change. You don't necessarily keep being of the same mind.

Hence, I begged for something unshakable.

"*By chance*, I meet a kindred spirit."

The next moment, a certain girl caught my eye.

Her hair was silver, whereas her eyes and clothes were black . She stood out quite a bit.

Is she the kindred spirit I come across by chance?

As if to answer my question, a ring reached my ears.

There was no doubting it. She was the kindred spirit I was looking for.

She went past by me without even deigning to look at the crash site. I turned round and followed her.

While doing so, I started thinking.

How should we encounter each other?

The more dramatic, the better. So I guess it would be best saving her when she's about to have an accident. I know how effective that is.

When she had reached the end of the bridge and had climbed down the stairs, I did so, too.

She leisurely strolled along the pavement.

Also on this side there were rubberneckers, who were watching the crash site opposite the road, but she ignored them as well. I followed her again.

Unlike everyone else, we were the only ones that weren't distracted by the accident and went on.

After making sure there weren't any onlookers around us anymore, I took out my Pendolo and whispered:

"*By chance*, she almost has an accident."

A ring resounded, and moments after, the screeching of tires was added to it.

A driver, who had apparently made a steering mistake, had cut a sudden curve and was speeding at full tilt toward the sidewalk.

She was right in front of the car.

As I was prepared, I was able to react quicker than anyone else and made a dash.

I save her when she's about to have an accident!

That's what I had imagined—but there was someone who did so before I was able to.

That person seized her and immediately leaped away, enabling him to evade the out-of-control car by a hair's breadth .

Who on earth is this? I was the one to save her!

While holding her in his arms, he patted her cheeks to help her come to. When she finally got a grip on herself, they

exchanged one or two words. The guy had apparently sustained an injury, which is why she cupped his hand with concern in her own.

Judging from their conversation and their attitude, they knew each other. He had come to ask her to make a purchase which he had forgotten to mention.

Damn coincidence.

Even now that I could call forth coincidences, I still found myself unable to grow fond of it.

They seemed to be quite familiar with each other, I had to note. Most likely, they were friends. Maybe more, considering that he just asked her for a purchase.

Such a barnacle. I'll first get rid of him. Now that's a good idea.

He explained to her what he needed and then went off in the other direction.

Just when I was about to pursue him, my mobile phone started to vibrate. The name of a classmate was on the display.

"Hello? It's horrible! Manami just had an accident!"

Mm? That's all? That's no news to me. I've been watching, after all. Well, I didn't just watch, though.

The information hadn't been long in coming. I suspected the ambulance had called the most recent contact in the call history of the victim's mobile phone.

The person on the other end told me what hospital the victim had been brought to. The class was planning to assemble there. At first, I wanted to decline, but then I had the feeling that this would hurt my social contacts.

So I had no other choice but to leave it at this for that day and go.

Well, I can meet her anytime—by chance. And next time we are certain to have a dramatic encounter. One she will never forget.

For this, I shall exercise patience.

Reflected in the glass of a shelf, which was stuffed with porcelain and ceramic crockery, one could see a young man.

He had somewhat disheveled hair—it was apparent that he hadn't blown it dry—and wore an unironed black shirt and a pair of black jeans. In fact, he was me.

More than anything, my eyes, which were famous for looking listless and sleepy, looked a lot sleepier than usual.

In other words, there was *that* little work—-as always.

In concreto, not a single customer had been here since I took over from Saki. To be honest, I was doubting if an employee was even necessary, while I was not in the position to say that.

But despite the poor sales, the owner, Towako-san, didn't fire any of us.

And as long as it stayed that way, I wasn't going to quit of my own accord—which had a reason.

I was still indebted to Towako-san. Until I settled that debt, I could not possibly quit.

While I had never asked Saki for her reason to stay here, I supposed it was a similar reason for her.

At the moment she was taking a break in the back section of the shop.

A door at the rear wall of the room connected the shop to a dwelling, whose ground floor consisted of a living room, a kitchen and a restroom. One floor higher, there were Saki and Towako-san's rooms, and a storage room.

Beyond the open door I spotted Saki in the living room , absorbed in a book, which, incidentally, was titled, "Be a Charming Shopgirl in Ten Easy Steps!"

On the cover was a woman, all tarted up as they are around Shibuya, who gave a V-sign, showing the back of her hand, while smiling at the camera. ...I must agree that it's important to improve ourselves. It's bound to come to good use.

And so, I silently wished her luck in her efforts and said nothing—*by no means* was I just too lazy to make a caustic remark on her choice of book.

"There's just too little to do..."

Out of boredom I carefully touched the scab on the back of my hand.

Because I had saved Saki from an accident the day before, I had grazed my hand. A scab had formed during the night.

While I was considering whether I should scrape it off yet or not, and then deciding against it, the front door opened and the attached bell rang.

Two middle schoolers, who wore the same uniform as the girl on the day before, entered. As far as I knew, the uniform was from a private middle school nearby.

Saki's words crossed my mind.

—Yes, I couldn't sell anything this time, but such a happy customer is bound to visit us again.

Did she really advertise us to her friends or something?

"Never."

While I was in such thoughts, one of the students sharpened her piercing glance and stomped toward the register while shaking her twin tails loose.

"Hey, do you remember the girl yesterday with the same uniform?"

"Uh? Err, yes. We certainly had such a customer."

"She had an accident," she said out of the blue, catching me off-guard.

"Well, I am sorry to hear that," I replied without finding any soothing words.

"Are you saying this while knowing whose fault it is?"

"Whose fault...?"

"This shop's, of course!" she shouted as she banged the counter.

I was once again surprised by her unexpected accusation, but I couldn't stay staggered all the time.

"You say our shop is at fault... I am afraid I cannot quite follow you?"

"She told me by phone that this shop mocked at her by proposing only eerie cursed stuff to her although she only wanted to buy a lucky charm. Can you believe it? In the end some scary stone was forced upon her and she was driven away to a shrine!"

I looked at a small basket on the counter that was filled with 100 yen stones. We were selling stones with strange shapes or colors for 100 yen, just like cheap accessory shops often do. If memory doesn't fail me, Saki gave her one as a welcome present, but apparently the girl thought it was a cursed stone.

*Fair enough, if you get service like **that**...*

"Apologize right now for forcing such a cursed stone upon her!"

To be honest, I couldn't help sighing. Cursed stone? That was complete bullshit. A false accusation taken to the extremes.

I could understand that the shock of a friend's accident would make her want to cast the blame on somebody, but she was completely misdirected. If anything, she should have gone to the one who made the accident.

"Listen, I'm sorry for your friend. I really am. But it's absurd to blame the accident on such a stone, you know? Besides, the articles our shop assistant proposed weren't really cursed or anything. There's no connection to that accident whatsoever. It's pure coincidence!" I countered, stopping to bother about a polite tone.

The girl, however, shook her head.

"I thought so, too. At first."

"?"

The girl banged the counter once more. Under her hand, which she pulled away, appeared another stone that looked the same.

"Another friend bought this stone here! The day she bought it, she fell on the tracks and was run over... Coincidence, you say? Two people had such a stone and both of them had an accident! Do you still claim it's coincidence?!"

It is. It is but mere coincidence.

It was easy to say so. But making her accept it seemed difficult. I'd gotten into trouble.

"Anyway, calm down. You've scared your little friend over there, too, after all..."

"What can I do?" asked Saki, who had stopped reading and come here without me noticing. She had probably overheard us.

"What can I do to comfort you? Please, you have but to ask."

I had thought she would take offense by such a false accusation, but apparently, Saki felt responsibility in her own way.

"As I said, apologize right now!"

"I'm sorry. I can't apologize for that."

You just did, I was about to remark, but I didn't want to be a faultfinder.

"There's no such power to these stones. I am sorry for your friend, but I can't blame this stone and apologize," Saki said and took one of the power stones (fake) on the counter. "So I'm afraid I can't say sorry, but if there is anything I can do to comfort you, please let me know. What can I do?"

"...Very well. If you carry that stone and nothing happens, I'll admit that it was coincidence," the girl said.

I couldn't believe she gave in so fast.

Does she even believe in curses? Sounds like a waste of time to me.

Saki accepted, however, without hesitation.

"Fine. Let's go with that. Tokiya, please take care of the shop while I'm away."

"Are you sure?" I asked while worrying if I should really let her go like this.

She calmly turned around to me, "It's a cinch. This is part of my after-sales service!" she assured dispassionately with a blank expression while giving a reverse peace sign at eye height just like the woman on the cover of that magazine.

Indeed, the will to provide service after the sale is important.

That said, I'd better confiscate that magazine when she gets back.

We left the shop and decided to stroll around in town.

...Well, for some reason or other I had joined this useless march.

She might think differently, but Saki was a little unpracticed with things like common sense. She kinda had a screw loose somewhere, making it an emotional rollercoaster to watch her. I was a little worried about leaving her alone with some unfamiliar middle schoolers. Perhaps, was I being a little overprotective?

The two girls were called Mitsuko Atobe and Kaoru Mineyama. The noisy brat who had charged at us while shaking around her twin tails was Atobe, whereas the calm one, who wore a somewhat large ear piercing that didn't suit her at all, was Mineyama.

...Maybe my discontent at this situation had made me a little worked up.

Anyways, I was carrying the (tentatively named) cursed stone and walking up front. Next to me was Saki. I didn't believe the story about a cursed stone or anything, but I didn't like the idea of having Saki carry it,

either. At some distance behind us, Atobe and Mineyama were following us.

"Hey, stop staring at me," Atobe complained immediately.

"I haven't been staring at *you'' to begin with."*

"So you've been staring at Kaoru? Stop that. She's not only unused to guys, but also suffers from androphobia. Try to make a move on her and you've got a problem with me!"

"Like I'd do that."

Since she got on my nerves, I looked ahead, when Saki elbowed me.

"You should have stayed, as I said."

"There's nothing to do there anyway, and if I leave it to you, you can't know what will happen next."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

We came across the place of the accident. Some small parts of the crashed car were scattered about and the

guardrail was somewhat bent. This was opposite the side of the street where Saki was about to get into an accident. Apparently, the driver who had accidentally steered toward Saki had done so because he had been distracted by this crash site.

There were, Naturally, no onlookers anymore and people passed by as though nothing had happened.

Atobe and Mineyama, however, stopped.

"What's wrong?"

"...This is where Manami had an accident!" Atobe explained bitterly.

"Where is she now?"

"In the hospital. She survived somehow... but it looks like there might be aftereffects. We're not allowed to visit her for a while," she said and turned around. "I don't want to go that way. Come this way."

Unwilling to walk past the place of Manami's accident, Atobe went back up the stairs of the footbridge. Mineyama followed her with some delay, and so did Saki and I, not left a choice.

"These events lately just won't stop happening..." Atobe whispered in a gloomy voice. "Already three friends of mine had a traffic accident."

"Three?"

"The first was Manami's boyfriend. Yesterday was Manami herself."

"Now that she mentions it, the girl indeed wanted a lucky charm because a friend of hers had an accident," Saki told me. As it seemed, that "friend" had been her boyfriend.

Fair enough that she was offended by the cursed stuff Saki offered her. Come to think of it, Saki assumed her friend would die when she introduced the articles...

It was no wonder that Atobe would feel hostility toward us if she had gotten wind of that.

"Who was the third?"

"Forgotten already? She was run over by a train on the day she bought that stone in your shop..."

Atobe remained silent about what had become of that girl. I refrained from asking as well.

That moment, while I was elsewhere in mind and climbing the stairs, a passenger collided with me. I staggered a few steps, before bumping against the handrail with my back.

"?"

Even though I had bumped against the handrail, I lost my balance; by ill luck, just the part of the handrail where I had rested on broke off because of rust.

"Wha—?!"

"Huh?!"

A small scream escaped my lips and merged with the surprised voice of somebody else.

Having lost my balance, my body tilted backwards into the empty space.

"Ugh!"

I reflexively reached for an unbroken part of the handrail. By a narrow margin I managed to grab hold and pulled myself back up onto the bridge.

The broken part of the rail was still dangling loose.

That was close! I almost kissed the street.

My hands and back were drenched in cold sweat.

"Are you all right?" Saki asked as she rushed to me.

When I was about to assure her of my safety, Atobe remarked with a sarcastic smile, "The cursed stone, perhaps?"

"Bullshit. The handrail was a bit rusty, that's all. Pure accident!"

After making sure the broken part wouldn't fall down by pulling it in and placing it on the stairs, we crossed the bridge.

It was awfully bad luck that this happened now of all times when I was trying to prove the harmlessness of the stone. This way I was only shooting myself in the foot.

When they had gotten off the bridge, Atobe and Mineyama walked ahead, followed by us.

On the right-hand side across the guardrail was the street, on the left-hand side was a line of various shops. This was where Saki had almost had an accident the previous day.

"By the way, about yesterday..." Saki started.

"Mm? Ah, what about it?"

"Nothing special, but...nk you."

She muttered something, but I couldn't quite understand her because of the traffic noise.

"Mm? What did you say...?"

"Uh..."

Then, my sight suddenly became darker.

I looked up and spotted a black object in the air that was falling toward me.

"Whoa!"

I reflexively protected my head and crouched down.

The object, however, directly hit my head—with a fluffy sound.

"...Huh...?"

I picked up the thing that had fallen on the ground after hitting my head. It was a pillow.

"Sorry, sir! Slipped out of my hands when I was about to bring it in!"

Hearing someone apologize, I looked up again. It was a guy, approximately in middle school, who had apparently dropped a pillow when trying to take it inside.

I felt a little awkward for getting so frightened at nothing.

"Lucky it was only a pillow, right? If it had been something heavy, you'd have been seriously hurt!" Atobe remarked with a grin. She didn't exactly seem worried. " Come on, won't you admit there's a curse on it, already? I'll even forgive you if you apologize!"

"A curse? That was pure coincidence I say."

"First, you almost fell from the bridge and now you could have gotten a blow on the head—one false step and you would have gone to the hospital! How can so many coincidences occur at once?"

"So you think that's a curse? Now, that's a sick curse!" I laughed back at her and walked off.

That moment, I had again the feeling that my sight got darker.

"!"

I immediately looked up. A big concrete chunk came falling at me. Part of the wall of a four-storied building beside me had crumbled away.

"Uwa!"

"Kyaa!"

I hurriedly used my outstretched leg to leap back. The crumbling chunk of concrete brushed my hair before crashing into the ground.

That was close! That wouldn't have caused just an injury if it had hit my head!

I unconsciously looked at Atobe, thinking that she would bring up the cursed stone again, but she wasn't about to add some comments at all. Quite the contrary—she was gazing at me aghast with a pale face. Most likely it was her who had screamed up just now.

She had been joking about a curse, but at the moment, things that made it really seem so were happening as if on cue.

Be it the passenger, the rusted handrail, the pillow or the concrete crumb—it had all happened by accident.

But it was completely absurd that all of this happened in a row.

Was it just a bad day?

Or was that stone really cursed?

Impossible. There can't be a curse on this.

"Tokiya!" Saki shouted to warn me about a bicycle that came rushing toward me along the pavement at full speed.

I suspended my thoughts and stepped aside to the edge of the sidewalk, when suddenly—I heard emergency braking behind me.

I whipped round, just to find a tilted truck coming toward us on only two wheels.

"What the fuck!" escaped my lips.

Again? How can I get in danger so many times in a row?

No way.

This can't be explained as pure coincidence.

But screaming out loud was all I could do.

The truck turned over on its side at full tilt and skidded into the guardrail. The collision opened the container from which a red avalanche came rushing down on me.

♦

It just won't go smoothly.

He was supposed to fall on the road by leaning against a broken handrail by chance.

He was supposed to be squashed by a concrete chunk that crumbled away from a building by chance.

He managed to get away from these accidents. I have to go for a more reliable method. But what method is more reliable? What method can he not evade?

By chance, a fierce earthquake occurs... No, this would get myself involved, and it's not exactly reliable.

By chance, he gets drenched in poison... No, there can't possibly be any poison around here, so this can't even happen.

Especially my last coincidence was a real shame.

A truck was supposed to fall on the side *by chance* and either run him over or bury him under its load.

I'm out of luck. Why of all things was *that* in the container?

Well, perhaps I should make a truck with a heavy load fall over and empty its load over him next...

No, I have no means of knowing when a truck with a heavy load shows up here. The probability of this happening would drop dramatically.

Coincidence is really just a probability.

When necessity equaled 100%, coincidence would be a tiny number incredibly close to 0%. But it won't do if the probability drops to 0%. A 0% coincidence won't occur.

In other words, unless a truck with a heavy load drives past here, it won't fall over and empty its load on him.

Sure, there's bound to be one sooner or later. But I need one now.

I can't make a truck fall over if there's none here. And while there are lots of common cars, I can't spot any trucks on the street...

Besides, I can't set the result of my coincidences.

I can make a handrail break off *by chance* when he leans against it, but I cannot set the result of him falling from the bridge.

I can make a chunk of concrete crumble away from a building *by chance*, but it doesn't necessarily hit his head.

I can make an electric wire get snapped *by chance*, but it may not touch him.

The results of my coincidences are really just coincidental. Hence, the result can be said to be a pure probability. Therefore, I have to create a coincidence whose result is certain.

Isn't there a more reliable method?

Isn't there a more reliable coincidence to kill him?

"Ptah!"

I spat out the flower petals in my mouth and erected myself.

That was close! I would be as flat as a pancake by now if the truck hadn't been loaded with flowers but something heavy like full oil drums.

While gazing at the flower shop truck that had turned over and crashed into a shop nearby, coloring its surroundings, I sighed in relief.

"Are you all right?"

Saki rushed to me and stretched her hand out. After giving her a yes, I stood up.

Atobe was, just like me, buried in flowers and sitting still, her face distorted with fear.

Mineyama had apparently had more luck and stood a bit offside, uninjured.

There was one more person: the bicycler from earlier, who was about in middle school, had fallen from his vehicle and was squatting down.

I was about to talk to them,

"——!"

But instead I pushed down Saki, covering her body with mine, and shouted:

"Get away! It's exploding!"

The very moment I finished, the truck blew up with a small explosion.

Some parts were blown away, and I could feel one of them fly past right above my back. Had I still been up, I would certainly have been pierced by that splitter.

"Saki, are you okay?"

Saki was looking up at me expressionlessly.

I tried slapping her cheeks. No reaction.

I tried poking her in the forehead. No reaction.

I tried pinching her cheeks. No reaction.

No, there was one. She hit back.

"If you *are* fine, then give a reaction!"

I couldn't read from her face whether she had been somewhere else in mind or just like always.

"I did just that!"

After I had made sure Saki, still in my arms, was safe and sound, I stood up. Atobe was lying prone a little off her previous position together with the bicyclist. Mineyama, who had been standing apart, had apparently gotten quite a scare and had fallen on her rear.

"Hey, get a grip!"

I raised her in my arms and slapped her cheeks to make her regain consciousness. Along with a grumble, she opened her eyes and gazed at me.

"How's Kiritani?"

"Kiritani?"

Ignoring my question, she rushed to the boy who had steered the bicycle. Fortunately, the explosion had not hit him.

After shaking his head a few times, he, or rather Kiritani, stood up.

"Hey, are you guys all right?" someone asked as he dashed out of a building toward Atobe and Kiritani. It was the boy who had earlier dropped a pillow on my head. It was obvious they knew each other.

"What is this supposed to be?"

The pillow-thrower visibly contorted his face, signing that he thought "Crap!" Moreover, the bicycler turned out to be the guy who had bumped into me on the bridge on closer examination.

"Are you guys in cahoots together?"

Things finally made sense. Middle schoolers wouldn't normally believe in something like a cursed stone. They had only demanded to walk through town and see if something happens, because they had a scheme.

"No wonder you were so confident something would occur."

To get away from the onlookers who were increasing, I led them a few steps away. Still paralyzed in shock, Atobe had to be supported by Kiritani or whatever he was called. She got what she deserved.

"Well, care to explain?" I demanded after looking at each of them. Atobe didn't raise her face, and the two guys were busy pushing the blame onto the other with their looks. To my surprise, the one to start explaining was Mineyama.

"Two of our friends had such a stone when they had an accident, so we decided to take revenge for them on that shop. Of course, nobody actually believed in this story about a cursed stone, but after experiencing two accidents, we were all churned up inside. Please believe me, all we wanted is to draw an apology from you with a little pressure."

"An apology is all you wanted?"

"...Well, by apologizing you would sort of admit the blame, so we also thought about requesting a compensation..."

"Extortion at its best!"

"I'm sorry, but we didn't mean to hurt you, honestly!" Mineyama lowered her head as much she could.

"Man, kids nowadays..."

"You sound like an old man," Saki remarked.

"Shut it!"

It was one thing to get an apology, but it was a whole new ball game if extorting money was their objective.

"...Hey you, go buy me some water in that store over there," I commanded Mineyama and gave her some coin. I wanted to do something about the disgusting taste of flowers in my mouth.

Mineyama nodded obediently and went to the convenience store.

I'll spare Mineyama for being honest with me. But the others are getting a lecture. Even if this makes me look like an old man.

"Well then, how are you going to make up for this mess?"

When I made a step toward them, Atobe immediately pushed me back.

"!"

That moment, a sign board came flying from somewhere and landed right between us, just to bounce against the street and roll away.

"——!"

"HYY!"

That was by a hair's breadth. A sign on about the 3rd floor of the shop, into which the truck had crashed, had broken off. If it hadn't been for Atobe, the board would have directly hit me.

I was unsure if I was supposed to be grateful or angry that she had pushed me away. But first, I wanted to help her up. However.

"Don't come close to me!" she hissed, almost screaming .

"Atobe?"

"...It's odd. Something's just odd! This stone must be cursed, after all..." she babbled with a pale face.

"Hey, stop this nonsense about a curse already! Didn't you just say it's all your—"

"We only tried to make you stumble or to drop a pillow on you or to get you hit with a bicycle! We didn't break that handrail, or make that wall crumble! That accident wasn't us, either..."

Atobe contorted her face and retreated from me.

"But..."

"There are dead and wounded! And that sign just now. .. Go away... go away! Don't involve me!"

Before I could do anything, Atobe had already gotten on her feet by herself and escaped. The two boys, surprised by her panicking, hurried after her.

Before I knew it, they had disappeared.

I had originally assumed this was a mere prank. But as Atobe had said, things had occurred that could be done deliberately and such that could not. Barging against me or throwing a pillow was no big deal even for Atobe and her pals. But destroying a handrail, making an entire wall crumble, causing a car accident and breaking off a sign clearly exceeded their capabilities.

Then what on earth had caused this—

"...Saki, you can go home now."

My sudden words visibly puzzled her.

"There's something you must confirm for me."

After a while, Mineyama returned with a suspicious face. Because she wasn't able to find her classmates.

"Atobe ran off with her friends."

"...Aha."

She remained calm despite being left alone.

"What happened to your comrade?" she asked.

"I sent her home. *I* have the stone, so it should be fine, right?"

"...Do you still want to continue?"

"Your classmates ran off believing this was a cursed stone. Can't stop until we prove that it's not."

"I... see."

She had probably intended to leave right after handing me the bottle. Her casting the eyes down as if searching for an excuse to leave made me feel quite bad.

"Say, do you believe in that curse?"

"I do think it sounds ridiculous, but now that such weird things have kept occurring one after another, I'm losing confidence."

"What things would that be specifically, apart from your pranks?"

"Um, the broken handrail, that wall, the car accident and the sign, I suppose."

"And not to forget the explosion, right?"

"Yes."

I blew air into the vinyl bag from the convenience store and popped it loudly. A short bang made Mineyama shriek.

"D-Don't startle me, please!"

"Oh? You can scream, too? I was sure you wouldn't, just like Saki."

To my teasing she responded with displeasure, "Of course I can."

"At any rate, as things stand right now, I can't help wondering myself, so keep me company for just a little longer."

I couldn't let her go just yet. There was something I had to confirm.

Damn it! If she hadn't barged in, the sign board would have gotten him.

She probably didn't even notice it when she pushed him back. It was pure accident. I can hardly believe such a lucky coincidence could happen.

Looks like the probability of surviving is generally higher than that of dying.

Well, but the same also applies to me: That one earlier was really risky.

I didn't expect an explosion.

I almost got involved myself.

Coincidence sure can be dreadful.

Lucky that I kept some distance to not get in the truck's way.

But why couldn’t he just die in that explosion?

I was sure he would put a stop to this for good now, but some sort of pride kept him from returning to his shop.

This time around, he led me to a construction site nearby for some reason.

I couldn't ask for better conditions, actually.

If he had gone back to the shop, all that would come to mind was an accidental fire or a truck crashing right into the shop, but that would put her in danger as well.

It's enough if only that guy dies.

The building seemed to reach about 8 floors and was surrounded by steel framing. Tarps were laid out around it.

Nobody was there anymore as that day's work had apparently already finished, and the wind blew loudly against the tarps, lifting them lightly. The wind had gotten stronger with sunset.

I don't know why he took me to such a place.

But there's no need to, anyway — for he is going to get squashed under the crane truck that falls over by chance.

Just as I had wished for, the truck started to shake in the wind and then slowly turned over on its side along with a deafening noise — straight toward my target who was talking to someone on the phone.

The impact shook the ground and raised a stink.

This should have done the trick for good. He didn't have enough time to react. Even if he noticed the truck, he couldn't possibly make it in time.

A ring resounded.

"Now that's a nice sound," I heard from the dust cloud.

"..."

A tiny little bit besides the tilted truck, he stood.

Then he said, even with a smile on his face, "Did you think I finally died for good, Kaoru Mineyama?"

♦

"Did you think I finally died for good, Kaoru Mineyama? " I asked, but Mineyama was still in shock as it seemed.

"Y-You were all right? Thank goodness. I thought you were crushed by the crane truck..." she said in a caring tone after coming to.

"Yeah, I thought so, too! What a day! This wasn't one of your pranks, right?"

"O-Of course not. But does that mean... that stone is cursed after all?"

"Which stone do you mean by 'that'?"

"Well, the one you are carrying..."

"Sorry, but I'm not. Threw it away earlier."

"Eh?"

"Which means that this accident just now wasn't due to some curse. Neither was the broken handrail, the crumbling wall, the sign board or the traffic accident."

"But then, but then do you claim it was pure coincidence?"

"Like so many coincidences could occur in succession!" I dismissed her blatant acting with a sneer. "It was you who caused all these accidents today, wasn't it?"

"W-What are you saying? How would I even be able to do that?"

"Are you sure?"

"There's no way I could make accidents happen like that!"

"Well, normally that would have been true. But you know what? There are ways that can't be explained by common sense.
—for example using a Relic."

Mineyama's pretty eyelashes flinched.

"Surprised that I know about the Relics?"

"What might that be?"

"An antique, of course?"

"Ah..."

"If you play dumb, that's what you're supposed to say. You did it wrong."

"Relic" isn't a word one doesn't normally know. It can be found anywhere. The only difference is in its meaning.

"What makes you suspect me?"

Suspecting someone doesn't require much of a foundation. The problem is to prove it, but I didn't have to go that far. I only had to make her admit.

"I was thinking you stood quite far away when the flower truck crashed, you know. Almost as though you predicted the accident? Although Atobe almost got involved despite having walked right next to you all the time."

"That's only because she stopped by chance..."

"There's still more. Atobe's reactions to the accidents differed between hers and those that happened by chance. You always reacted the same. You weren't

surprised by the pillow attack, nor by the concrete chunk. Even though you *were* startled by a lousy plastic bag."

"That's because I was completely taken by surprise and couldn't even react..."

"But you were quite surprised by the truck explosion, right?"

"Well, of course..."

"So an explosion does not completely take you by surprise?"

"..."

"Also, when you listed all the accidents, you forgot about that explosion. Because you didn't plan that one, right?"

"I just forgot to say it, that's all..."

"Furthermore, how did you know about the sign board ? You weren't there at the time, were you?"

"!"

Most of this were just bluffs. It was perfectly possible that someone might not know the word "relic". Also, it was not like I remembered all her reactions. The falling sign board she could have seen from over there, too.

I was far from a skillful detective of some mystery novel who cuts off the escape route step by step. But Mineyama kindly provided an excuse for each of my trumped up charges. Which was proof that there was more to it. Which on the other hand is another trumped-up charge, I guess?

There was one fact, however, I was sure about.

"Looks like you wanted to exploit Atobe's plan and cast the blame of everything on the cursed stone, but that stone is really *not* cursed. That stone is not the stone that brings others ill luck. The real one is stowed away deep in the shop."

"...Eh?"

As it was Relics the owner, Towako-san, was collecting , all the articles on the shelves were fakes of Relics she had tried to obtain.

Naturally, she also succeeded at times, and the shop was full with documents concerning this field.

A stone that brings others ill luck did exist in truth. But it was stowed away, and due to its nature, it was strictly prohibited to take it out.

I did not claim that the stone wasn't cursed because I believed it did not exist. I simply claimed so, because I knew it was somewhere else.

Well, I had been slightly unsure, though, so I had Saki confirm it for me.

"Admit it already! It wasn't coincidence, right?"

"I thought I did quite well, though," muttered Mineyama after taking a deep breath.

If she had kept playing dumb or asked for proof like in some suspense drama, I would have had no choice but to give up and go home.

"...Are Relics so well known?"

"Absolutely not. I suppose most don't know of them. It's just that I knew — by chance."

"Again coincidence?" she hissed. Her anger had quashed her will to hide her motives any longer. "I was wrong in thinking nobody would know about the Relics, at least so near..."

"Well, that's only normal. I didn't think these accidents had anything to do with Relics from the start, either! But when accidents keep happening like that, you know..."

"Because you keep evading them! In fact, this should have been settled by you falling on the street and getting run over. Besides, had you not known about the Relics, you would have believed it was all coincidence."

"Maybe, yeah."

"May I pose a question, too? How did you manage to evade everything I threw at you? Unless you're blessed by outstanding luck, it should have been impossible to evade accidents so many times."

"What do you think?"

"I think it may be thanks to a Relic you own."

"50%. Guess what Relic it is and get the full 100%."

"I'm fine with zero points. I have no intention of accompanying your little quiz. I don't know how you did it, but I can solve this by making it impossible to evade!"

My back was getting sweaty.

The real problem started here. I had no idea what Mineyama was going to do now that she had admitted everything.

"—Don't underestimate the coincidences I create."

—Then a painful noise ran through my head.

Several steel beams accelerated down toward me.

I dodged the first one to the right. The beam stuck into the ground.

Another one I dodged by jumping back. This time it didn't stick into the ground but bounced toward me.

I covered my head and squatted down, evading the girder by a hair's breadth.

But suddenly, another steel beam stuck into the ground right in front of me and threw up a storm of splinters, which hit me like stones.

They cut into my cheek, my arms and my legs.

Unable to resist the blow, I fell over on my back.

Before my eyes I could make out an "H" for some reason.

The moment I realized this was an end of a steel beam, my head was squashed.

"_____"

Several steel beams came falling towards me with increasing speed.

I dodged the first one to the right. The beam stuck into the ground.

Another one I dodged by jumping back. This time it didn't stick into the ground but bounced toward me.

I covered my head and squatted down, evading the girder by a hair's breadth.

But suddenly, another steel beam stuck into the ground right in front of me and threw up a storm of splinters, which hit me like stones.

They cut into my cheek, my arms and my legs.

Unable to resist the blow, I fell over on my back.

Before my eyes I could make out an "H" for some reason.

The moment I realized this was an end of a steel beam —

—I had already rolled away and dodged the steel press. The beam crashed into the ground and flew away diagonally.

The deafening noise hurt my ears.

"...W-What? How could you evade this?!"

Indeed, so many beams were not to be dodged easily. Mineyama must have been sure I'd die.

"Who knows?"

Again, a painful noise ran through my head——

A couple of steel girders came again falling towards me.

This time there were five of them and they charged at me at the same time.

Somehow I managed to evade three of them, but the fourth one crushed me.

——But this wasn't reality.

It was but the future my Relic showed to me.

My right eye was artificial. A Relic named "Vision" had been implanted where once my real eye had been.

"Vision" would show me the immediate future.

However, it wouldn't just show me all of the future. I couldn't foresee the winning number of a lottery, or the winner of a sports match. Not even the weather. Nor could I see any future events at will.

But there was one type of future it would show me without fail.

That is, when I or someone I knew was in danger. At those times, it showed me the moment of their death.

When that happened, a pain would run through my head, much like static TV noise, followed by a cut-in of the future.

And then I would take another action than in the future shown, trying to avert the predicted death.

Earlier, Mineyama had said that she had "created" coincidences.

From that, I guessed she owned a Relic that enabled her to cause coincidences.

A dreadful item, indeed.

Coincidences cannot be predicted, thus they cannot be prevented, either.

But my "Vision" happened to be a nice match with her Relic.

If coincidences *can* be predicted, it's not impossible to prevent them.

Be it Saki's accident, my falling from the bridge, the concrete chunk crushing my skull, getting torn up by that truck explosion or the crane truck falling over, I had predicted all of them a moment before actually happening.

I had not seen, however, any of Atobe's pranks or my getting buried under flowers. Most likely because my life hadn't been in danger.

As for the sign board, I had not predicted it because the future of getting hit by it had not existed in the first place.

"No way..."

Most likely, after witnessing that I had gotten away from her steel beams twice already, she had realized that it wasn't something uncertain like coincidence or luck that enabled me to evade her coincidences.

Mineyama grumbled frantically, "T-This time I'll get you...!"

"You should stop."

"Eh?"

"How long does coincidence stay coincidence?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that accidents don't normally repeat themselves that often."

Relics aren't almighty. There are restrictions and limits.

If Mineyama's Relic was restricted to solely coincidences, deviating from that restriction was going to put herself in danger.

"Listen. This is a well-meant warning. Steel beams don't come falling down three times in a row just 'by chance'. It's not coincidence if it happens several times. If your Relic is designated to create coincidences, it cannot create certainties. Try it and you will cause a conflict. If that happens, the relic will either break or your life will be at stake."

"..."

"Stop *now* while you still can!"

"...Coincidences will occur as many times as *I wish*!"

"Fool! Stop it!"

However, there was no noise.

There was no future shown to me.

And there was no steel beam that came falling down.

Instead, I heard a clear chink.

The round part of her rather large piercing had broken in two and fallen on the ground.

"My, my Relic...!"

Mineyama's somber scream drowned the chink and echoed through the evening construction site.

♦

Why did I have to be born as a girl?

One cannot choose to be a boy or a girl when born. If one could, I would have chosen to be male. I have always thought so.

That didn't change with time. No, it even got worse when I hit puberty.

I always fell in love with girls.

In elementary school, I plucked my courage and confessed several times.

The answer was always no.

Even worse; I lost my friends and was deemed abnormal at times.

In middle school, I decided to stop with this.

You can't change your heart, but you can change your actions.

But wanting to give myself just one chance, I begged to the Pendolo.

To meet someone of the same mind by chance.

Shortly after, I met Miki Kano.

She was like me.

She was also attracted to girls, and so we were attracted to each other and came together.

At the time, I didn't dare think that her feelings might change.

But the end came quick.

Just like a healing wound from an accident, her feelings for me disappeared.

Miki and I had both been in an all-girls elementary school. Therefore, there had only been girls that could be the targets of her admiration. But with graduating to a mixed middle school, she regained what is called a "healthy mind".

It's a simple story, really. She fell for a guy.

On top of that, it was the boyfriend of her friend Manami.

Manami's boyfriend did have an accident, but this was simply because he saved Miki when she was about to have one, and was injured in her place. This dramatic encounter bent her feelings for me toward him.

Perhaps, I would have accepted her change of mind if it had been a girl she fell in love with.

But it was not.

It was betrayal. Betrayal of my heart.

My feelings for her had been so serious, so pure, that I thirsted for revenge all the more.

I took revenge on Miki—using coincidence.

I committed the murderous accident of making her fall on the tracks at the station by chance.

After that, Manami got wind of my relationship with Miki. Manami's boyfriend had heard it from Miki, and Manami from her boyfriend.

And then she denied my feelings. Saying they were wrong.

She had no idea. She didn't know even a bit of my pain.

Therefore, I passed judgment on her.

Committing the murderous accident of making her get run over by a rampaging car.

But now I can't do this anymore.

My Pendolo was destroyed.

This wasn't supposed to happen.

This wasn't supposed to happen.

Where is he? Where is the guy who destroyed my dear Pendolo?

I heard someone's footsteps stop right before me.

I quickly raised my head.

It wasn't him, but her.

I haven't caused this. I can't cause any coincidences anymore.

But why is she here, then?

By real chance?

"It's no coincidence that I'm here," she declared.

Right. I can't cause any coincidences anymore, and there's no way such a gentle coincidence would occur at such a convenient time.

So this must be fate.

It was destined from the very beginning that this was going to happen.

After all, you are my fated partner.

"Nor is it fate."

However, my thoughts were denied.

"B-But my wish was to meet a kindred spirit!"

"...Yes, in a sense we are kindred," she whispered, "In the sense of having used Relics to commit a sin."

She looked down at me with sorrowful eyes.

"It seems like Tokiya didn't think that much ahead, but if you have taken part in the accidents of your classmates, then you ought to watch yourself. The sin that comes from Relics cannot be cleansed by anyone. So if you've already thought yourself to be safe, rest assured that you will get the bill for playing with others' fates. Fate is neither as vague nor as gentle as to be cleared away as coincidence. I just wanted to let you know."

...When I came to, I was standing there alone.

She was nowhere to be seen anymore. There was no trace of her. Was it a dream?

Maybe.

Coincidence hates me, so there's no way I could meet her just by chance.

Suddenly, I was dazzled by a fierce light as if it wanted to wake me up.

I then noticed that it was the headlight of a truck that was entering the construction site. The driver spotted me and yelled , "What are you doing here?! This is a prohibited zone!"

Indeed, I'm at fault for entering here, but that's no reason to yell at me, is it?

...Damn it. If I had the Pendolo, I would cause a nice accident for you...!

But I do not have it anymore.

While I was clenching my teeth in irritation, the truck approached me.

However, the vehicle suddenly started to tilt.

Upon a closer look, I noticed that the truck had run up onto the steel girders I had caused to fall.

Like in slow-motion, it slowly tilted and the moment its body was parallel to the ground, it finished its fall with a tremendous noise.

Then, after the sound of wires snapping, an avalanche of thick steel pipes came rushing down on me.

"Huh?"

While my vision was filled with uncountable pipes, one thought occupied my mind:

—Hadn't I once thought of the coincidence of a heavily loaded truck falling over?

♦

The moment I arrived at the shop and closed the door, I let out a grand sigh of relief.

"I thought I was done for."

Indeed, I was able to predict my death using Vision, but that did not mean I was safe.

Just because I could see the future, there was no guarantee that I could also prevent it.

In this case I may have known where the beams would land, but I could still have failed dodging them.

Besides, if she had really found an unfailing coincidence, predicting it would have not been worth a damn.

For an absurd example, even I would have to take off my hat if I was by chance attacked by a terrorist with a machine gun.

That's why I had set up a risky stage.

In order to make Mineyama believe I could evade all her coincidences, I deliberately put myself at risk and dodged the steel girders twice.

I had then wanted to talk her into giving up, bluffing that her Relic would break or that she would get in danger.

Still, she didn't listen and tried to make some steel beams fall down a third time.

I was not at all positive whether I would have succeeded in dodging them.

At the very end, it was only me who was saved by chance.

Only now did my knees start to tremble.

I leaned against the door—but failed, as it opened exactly at that moment, and so I fell over on my back at full tilt.

"What are you doing?" asked Saki from above.

"Backward rolls!" I jested. "But hey, where have you been?"

"...I was looking for you because you took so long! I thought she got you with her Relic."

"You were worried about me?"

"Yes."

The "worry" was well hidden in her emotionless speech.

"Say, Tokiya, why do you think she targeted you?"

"I guess she thought that stone was an actual Relic that causes ill luck, since she knew about the Relics. And so she sought revenge on us for selling them. Well, but it looks like she didn't expect us to know about them, too. It's a good thing to care for one's friends, but she should really learn to think before she acts!"

"Hmm." I couldn't read from her blank expression whether she was satisfied with my answer or not. "Well, not that I mind, but why don't you stand up instead of taking roots down there?"

Saki went around me into the shop.

"You don't say!"

I stood up and tried to enter the shop, but being still wobbly on my legs, I stumbled over the door sill.

"Whoa!"

Having lost my balance, I instinctively reached out and held on to the first thing I could grab.

That this *thing* happened to be Saki, and that I was practically clinging to her was nothing but, "P-Pure coincidence! An accident!"

"You stumbled by chance and had to cling to me?" she said without showing any astonishment at me clinging to her... no, at me using her as a support. "Like such a lucky coincidence could occur."

1. ↑ Literally "Name is omen." Implies that the name is fitting for the object or person. Saki's name is written

舞, which translates as 'Blossom of the dancing field' Also see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nominative_determinism

Chapter 2 - Statue

Something belies your expectations.

Something just won't go your way.

Something leaves you at a loss.

Occurrences like these are hardly rare.

For instance, let's consider a common purchase: some buy brand named articles only to find out that they were ripped off, others purchase something on the Internet and get something entirely different from what they were expecting. Stories like these are a dime a dozen.

Everyone has had such experiences more than just once or twice, and dealt with them them either by just leaving things as is or by returning the article.

But if that article happens to be a *Relic,* that won't do.

If it merely turns out to be fake, that's one thing.

But if it's real and its power turns out to be wholly different than expected, then it's no laughing matter.

Absolutely no laughing matter.

A child lay in bed, breathing painfully.

Not even 10 years old, she had apparently been suffering from a high fever for three days. The heat had flushed her face, and on her forehead sweat beads kept appearing no matter how many times her mother wiped them off. From time to time, she coughed with pain, only to groan afterward, with her head aching from the sudden movement.

There was no doctor in the village. The only profession there among the fields was farming.

There was no medicine in the village, either. While sometimes wandering medicine sellers came by to spend the night, the villagers hadn't any money with which to buy from them. From time to time the villagers could get some medicine in exchange for a bed and a breakfast, but nowhere near enough for everyone.

Thus, rest was the only cure available.

Thus, whoever aggravated his illness would die.

We became aware of these dire circumstances on the day we arrived.

"I beg you, please save our child!"

It was no wonder that the child's parents relied on us, given how things were in the village. For we had played doctor in the past.

Yes, you could say that we had played doctor.

But that was not quite accurate.

In fact, we did not use any medicine nor perform any operations.

His touch was all there was to it.

It was just my master touching the sick.

"You needn't worry anymore," he whispered softly and touched the child's forehead with his right hand.

A moment later—

Her wild breathing started to calm down bit by bit. The high fever that had made her cheeks red and had brought the sweat to her brow disappeared into oblivion. The endless cycle of painful coughing was broken and the child opened her eyes as if nothing had happened.

"Mm? What's the matter?"

These were her first words after three long days of high fever.

Her parents burst into tears when they realized that she had survived after all, and embraced their wondering child.

The onlooking villagers were speechless with admiration at first, but then started to overwhelm us with words of appreciation and admiration.

His touch would heal any disease on the spot.

His touch would heal any wound on the spot.

It was a miracle that could hardly come from a human hand.

Divinity dwelt in his right hand—

"'Sup guys!"

With a casual greeting I, Tokiya Kurusu, entered the shop.

The interior was stuffed with miscellaneous items such as accessories, jars, portraits and whatnot. "Stuffed"—not "stocked"—for it looked much more like a store*room* than a store. Though many storerooms may, in fact, be tidier.

And this deserted backstreet shop, the Tsukumodo Antique Shop (FAKE), was where I worked part-time.

"Nobody here?"

Normally, a rather curt girl all in black was supposed to be standing there behind the counter, but she was, apparently, in the other part of the building.

I opened the door at the back and went further inside. The shop was directly connected to the residence of the two.

I entered the living room and, instead of the people I was looking for, found something strange on the table.

"What's this?"

It was a potted plant and a doll of a dog. Some sort of weed was planted in the pot and tied to the doll by some cord. Moreover, there was a clock face on the pot with a hand indicating the time.

Upon closer inspection, it appeared to be an alarm clock and it was set to 5pm.

In fact, it happened to be just one minute before 5 o'clock. The dog opened its eyes and started to stroll about on the table, pulling the weed slowly out of the pot .

By all appearances it was some kind of automaton clock, although I didn't quite get its purpose. ?

As the weed was being pulled out, its brown root slowly became visible. Watching the root closely, that part started to look to me like a human head and gave me the shivers.

I was, however, unsurprised. After all, the owner of this shop was a sucker for such gimmicks.

But wow, that's one grotesque alarm clock. I wouldn't want to wake up to that thing every morning.

These thoughts crossed my mind, while the dog kept moving away from the pot step by step, revealing more of the head-like root.

That alarm clock kinda reminded me of something.

Let me think...

Wasn't there some tale or legend where dogs were used to pull up some kind of plant?

What was it called again...? Mm...

"Ah. It was a mandrake."

When a mandrake root is pulled up, the plant screams and kills all who hear it, which is why dogs are used to do the picking...

"...Oh no, please not."

It was just when a bad premonition struck me that the clock hand pointed at the five and the dog doll made the last step.

The head-like root slipped out of the pot and raised a scream while pulling a face like *The Scream* by Edvard Munch.

"
KRYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
!!!"

"
UWAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
! HEY!"

I knocked over the mandrake clock.

The clock fell onto the floor and continued to groan there.

"Tch, just a fake," flicked a woman as she appeared as though she had been watching the whole time.

It was the owner of this shop as well as my employer, Towako Settsu.

She was probably best described as a cool beauty. Well-formed eyebrows adorned her face, a strong will shone in her eyes, and smooth black hair of a brilliant luster reached down to her waist. She had a slender build and was a wee bit taller than me, whose body size was equal to that of the average high-schooler, making her appearance quite provocative. The same could be said for

her clothes: she wore a skin-tight shirt with a jacket and slim leather pants that accentuated her long legs.

However, her behavior was far removed from her looks.

Not only did she collect bizarre oddities, but she also found it funny to test them on me like a kiddie.

That said, it was not like she collected those oddities just for a hobby.

In fact, what she collected were known as *Relics*.

Not antiques or objects of art, but tools with special abilities created by mighty ancients or magicians, or objects that have absorbed their owners' grudges or natural spiritual powers.

In tales and legends, there are often tools that have special powers; for instance, a stone that brings good luck, a doll whose hair grows night after night, a mirror that shows your future appearance, a sword that brings ruin to anyone who draws it.

Everybody has most likely heard of their existence.

However, people consider them mere fantasies because they have not seen them, they do not notice them even if they are right before their eyes, and they believe in some sort of coincidence if something mysterious occurs.

Some feel unconcerned, while others are certain such things do not exist.

Regrettably though, Relics are closer to us than we may think.

Her hobby was to collect those Relics.

Well, most of the times, like this time, she was conned into buying fakes.

"A lot of cash went out of the window for this mandrake clock..." grumbled Towako-san after switching off the still-crying clock.

"Just for the record: what would happen if it were real? "

"You would have died."

"Heck, that's no alarm clock anymore, is it!?"

"Oh come on, it's not like that'd be the end of the world ."

But it is! Quite literally! I'm sure I lost a few years of my lifespan because of that thing...

"By the way, when did you come back?"

She had been absent for a week for her Relic purchases .

"Mm, just now. Tokiya? Put this on a shelf."

Towako-san ordered me to add the mandrake clock (FAKE) to the shop. And up goes the stockpile of items that had nothing whatever to do with antiquity.

"Where do you want it?"

"I don't care."

"Why don't you try working out a system for a change ?"

I returned to the shop and put the clock in some free space next to an old camera. Incidentally, it was a (fake of a) camera that would capture a picture of the past of the person you took a photograph of.

Towako-san entered the shop as well, and pushed on the register in passing.

Upon seeing the printed weekly sales, she pulled a sour face. Apparently, she *did* care a little about how we sold.

I would highly recommend that she didn't, though.

"What else did you buy?"

"Ah, actually, I made a nice find this time."

She quickly erased the sales history from her mind and told me about her find.

"It's a statue from a village that was deserted about a hundred years ago, you know? But boy does that thing

look grotesque, even though it's said to cure any illness if you touch it."

"Is it true?"

"Apparently, nobody ever tried."

"That sounds *damn* fishy if you ask me."

"I wouldn't have bought it either if that was all, but in fact there is another myth according to which you die of an incurable illness if you touch the statue."

"Isn't that kinda the exact opposite?"

"Right. One myth says it cures any illness. Another says it kills you through illness. What do you say? Don't you get excited to find out why there are two opposing myths for one and the same statue?"

"Well, can't deny that."

"So I got ahold of some documents and research materials, which I'll be perusing starting today. The shop's in your hands," she blurted out and turned round. "Ah, not to forget!" she suddenly added, "Be absolutely sure not to touch the statue directly until we know what

effect it has! *If* you touch it, touch it with gloves. Otherwise I'll take no responsibility if you die."

"Got it."

I nodded... and froze.

Before our eyes stood my coworker, Saki Maino, holding an odd statue barehanded.

"Kill her!"

"That harlot is a witch in human guise!"

"She has brought calamity on our village!"

Countless angry cries resounded outside the temple. Probably most of the villagers had surrounded the temple by then.

Why has it come to this? I just wanted to save them.

I lifted the statue in my hands in front of my face.

It was a statue that would cure any illness. It was a statue my master had bequeathed to me. It was a statue full with his gentleness... and yet...

—He must have left behind a curse.

I recalled the words I had received from a villager. Was it true? Was it a curse he had left behind?

I wanted to believe this was wrong, that this wasn't the case.

I wanted to believe that he wouldn't do such a thing.

Suddenly, I felt that the temple had gotten warmer. It was winter at the time, and it was not possible for spring to arrive out of the blue. In my confusion, the temperature continued to rise.

As the temperature soared, I heard the sound of wood crackling.

I immediately realized that the building had been set on fire.

It didn't take long for the warmth to change into heat.

I must flee.

In an attempt to stand up, I fell on the ground and threw up all that came welling up.

It was clear to me that I had thrown up blood.

As of late, I had been throwing up blood so frequently I had gotten used to it. I, too, had been afflicted with the plague.

More importantly, I was concerned about the statue in my hands.

Please do not get stained with my blood.

With my sleeves, I wiped off the blood that may or may not have stuck to the statue, and upon finishing, I firmly held it once more.

My illness, however, remained uncured.

The statue that once cured any illness could no longer cure any illness.

Which death will come quicker? Death by disease or death by fire?

My awareness dulled and became clouded due to the internal and external sources of heat.

Bygone days crossed my mind as I slowly lost consciousness.

His name was Juan.

While he was only a little over thirty, his hair was pure white. However, it did not make him appear aged and infirm, but in conjunction with his skin, white as though it had not seen the sun, it was a representation of his purity.

At the time, Juan-sama dwelt in an abandoned temple in the recesses of the mountains. Without tying himself to any denomination, he simply and devoutly worshipped the Buddha.

At times he would pray, at times he would carve statues of the Buddha, and at times—he would heal people with his right hand.

The people of the village often visited his temple in need of his right hand.

The people were poor and the land was barren in this village . They lived humbly off the few crops the land grudgingly yielded. Because the people could not afford medicine and because there was no doctor, whoever was taken sick went to him to receive the blessings of his right hand.

The plague ravaging the village started with coughing and continued with a high fever, after which the victim threw up blood. Next, the victim fell into paralysis, his metabolism slowed, and eventually he died.

But ever since my master—and his right hand in which divinity dwells—had come to this village, the plague had claimed no more victims.

I, too, had received the blessings of his right hand.

My parents had abandoned me in the mountains and I was on the verge of dying either of starvation because I had nothing to eat or of hypothermia because I was buried in snow, when I was rescued by Juan-sama, who was traveling.

While I can't remember well what happened when I was rescued, I know that a gentle warmth filled my cold body and revitalized my life force.

Since then, I stayed with him and took care of the everyday chores.

I was not the only one who wanted to live with Juan-sama, but he always rejected the others.

That said, there was no special reason as for why I was the only one to stay with him. Most likely, he had simply pitied me—a girl not even half his age with no one else to depend on.

In order to return the favor, I cleaned the temple and prepared the meals and washed our clothes each and every day without exception.

The object of worship at the temple was a golden statue of the Buddha that belonged to Juan-sama. He himself had carved it out of Cypress wood and gilded it. It was only about the size of a stray cat, though... That comparison may be a little crass. But as I am uneducated, I cannot think of a better one.

Anyway, Juan-sama treasured the statue, and therefore I did so as well.

He cherished the statue and healed the people without fail. When healing, he always kept it by his side to borrow its power.

My first task in the morning was to clean the statue.

Each morning I polished it with a towel soaked in cold winter water.

"Forgive me for making you do such hard work."

Juan-sama often expressed his gratitude when seeing me cleaning or washing with ice-cold water.

But such tasks were far from being a pain. To me, it didn't matter whether the water I used was ice-cold or lukewarm.

One reason was, of course, my attitude, but it was mostly because my hands were already numb and their skin as hard as stone.

I had probably been buried for too long in the snow before being rescued. My hands were half-dead.

Even Juan-sama's right hand was unable to heal the deadened parts .

While his right hand could cure any illness and injury, it could not revive the dead. Likewise, it could not heal dead body parts.

Nonetheless, thanks to his hand, I could avoid losing mine.

I could not move my fingers freely, but I could move them a little. Holding things with my arms was also possible, so it was not that much of a deal after some accustoming.

I was comfortable with the way it was.

However—

"Forgive me. If only I had discovered you sooner..."

From time to time, he would spontaneously fold his hands around mine and rub them gently.

Only at these times, I wished that I still had feeling in them.

Earlier I said that divinity dwells in his right hand, but I believe there is no God.

If God can't even save a village from a plague or a child from starving in the wilderness, then it doesn't matter if he exists or not. And if it doesn't matter, then he might just as well not exist.

And so, he was God to me.

If he, who has saved a village from a plague and a child from starving in the wilderness, is not God, what else could he be?

But when I told him this, he admonished that I shouldn't say such outrageous things.

And so I stopped saying it, even while thinking so to myself.

Once, I asked him about his right hand.

Apparently, it all started with a dream.

He had cut his hand across something like a rusted nail and received a high fever, which subsequently drove him to the

brink of death for several days. But one day, a Buddha appeared in his dreams and touched Juan-sama's cheek with his right hand.

Despite being in a dream, he felt much cooler.

Finally, before leaving, a Buddha touched his right hand and told him to save the people.

When he woke up on the next day, the fever was gone.

The first thing he did upon awakening was touch a sparrow with broken wings.

Everyone was sure the sparrow would never fly again, but the instant he touched it, the sparrow soared into the air.

It was then that he realized that a Buddha had granted a power to his right hand.

At the same time, he decided that saving people was his calling.

He then traveled from place to place, performing miracles and saving people.

But life just doesn't go as we want.

His mysterious power did not only bring blessings, but also doubt and fear.

The more people he saved, the more his power was suspected to be some sort of a curse, and it wasn't uncommon for him to be driven away under the fear that he was a demon under the guise of a human.

If he were to be driven away from this place as well, I was going to follow him like I had done so far.

I was happy just being together with him.

The thought of leaving him had never even occurred to me.

Nonetheless, we still sought peace.

The people here accepted us.

I wished that we could remain at this place for a long time.

I liked our life here and wanted it to continue.

—But there was one worry I had.

Recently, my master started to cough frequently.

Similar to the coughs of the villagers that visited him for a cure.

When I told him to cure himself with his right hand, he only laughed and said that I was right.

The statue was—in a word—eerie.

It was quite difficult to determine what it was made of. While it looked like rusted iron, it also looked like oxidized copper, and it could even pass as rotten wood. Its color was a dry-looking dark red, and its height was about 50 centimeters, whereas it was so thick that I was barely unable to touch my fingers when I closed my hands around it.

Its shape, however, was the greatest riddle to me. It looked like neither the figure of the Buddha, nor the figure of a devil. Looking as abstract as it did, it gave off an eerie impression, much like seeing faces in trees or walls.

For the time being, we placed the statue, which could not be less fit as an objet d'art to accessorize one's room, in a glass case for dolls in the living room.

As for Saki, who had touched the statue despite Towako-san's warning: "Welcome-kachoo. Can I help you-kachoo? Thanks for visiting-kachoo!"

She was working her shift just like always, but while sneezing all the time, being a little sickish. By the way, that customer just now had realized that he made a mistake the moment he opened the door and turned around on the spot. The attendance time of that day's first customer was one second.

"You sick?" I asked her incidentally because I had nothing to do.

"Seems so-kachoo. I'm not feeling so well since the other day-kachoo. But I don't think it's serious-kachoo."

Watching Saki's non-varying expression change continuously—though it was only sneezes—was quite entertaining.

While we're on it, "sneezes" are quite broad. There are repressed sounds like "kchu" or "bshu", but there are also hearty ones like "Ah-choo!!". Experts liken this to a " Damn-it!!", but that's only done by men, so that's a different kettle of fish.

Nobody cares about men's sneezes, but girls can set off their cuteness with just a sneeze. By the way, the sneeze of my preference is "kachoo".

In that sense, Saki's sneezes are pretty good...

"....."

When I came to because I felt a cold glance, Saki was indeed giving me a cold look.

"What?"

"You've been thinking nonsense again, haven't you?"

"You can scrap the 'nonsense' part."

Apparently, after working together for one year already, she could guess what I was thinking.

But it couldn't be helped. There was so nothing to do, that I had to think such nonsense. Oh... I just admitted it was nonsense.

"If Towako-san discovers you-kachoo, being so absent-minded-kachoo, she'll cut your pay-kachoo-kachoo!"

"She's shut herself up in her room, so that's no worry."

Since three days ago, Towako-san has stayed in her room and has been reading through the documents.

According to Towako-san, that statue was able to cure any illness, but seeing that it could not even cure Saki's common head cold, there was not much hope. As for the other story, about it inflicting a terminal illness: I had never heard of a terminal illness that started with sneezes . Not much hope there, either.

While she wouldn't admit it, everything indicated that she had gotten her hands on a fake again.

"All's right with the world, huh?"

"Already in midlife crisis?"

After a long while, Towako-san crawled out of her room and patted me on the back while drinking a vitamin drink with carrot extracts. Her hair was tied back , most likely so it wouldn't get in her way, and her eyes were half-closed, most likely because she hadn't gotten

enough sleep. She gave off the impression that it wouldn't take much longer until she'd have a three-day stubble.

"You can't really talk about others, now can you? So, did you learn something?"

"Mm... I've only started reading, so it's still too early to say something, but I made a few discoveries."

"For instance?"

"That statue was originally an object of devotion of some temple."

"That ugly thing?"

"Those statues don't necessarily have to be Buddhas or Bodhisattvas, you know. There's that famous example where they worship the thing men wear between their legs, isn't there? They all have their own meaning and that's what's important."

"And what meaning should this thing have?"

"No clue. But there was another most interesting story, according to which the priest of that temple had a

god-like ability that could cure any illness with his touch. "

"Isn't that exactly the same as with the statue?"

"There were also some anecdotes to this. One time a child with a high fever recovered at once when he touched it, or another time a man fell from a roof and broke his leg. But as soon as he was touched by the priest , his bones grew together and he could walk again. Ah, right, there was also a hilarious one: one time that temple offered mushroom soup to all the villagers, but they all got a foodborne disease because the mushrooms were poisonous. And then, the priest went around touching them, upon which they stood up as if nothing had happened."

"Sounds fishy, doesn't it? Quite like one of those bogus sects."

"Yeah, making a priest look as though he had some sort of power is a common trick they use to gather members. It just bothers me that there are so many of those anecdotes."

I took a look at the shop.

As far as I could judge from Saki, who was sitting by the counter, coughing, the statue was a fake after all. Probably, the day was near that a new article would be lined up on the shelves.

"Saki, you can take a break," I said, but there was no response from the counter. "Saki?"

When I patted her on the back, she raised her face and looked up at me with moist eyes, surprised. She was about to say something, but was disrupted by a cough.

A cough? Didn't she sneeze until just now?

"Saki, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she replied as bluntly as ever, but coughed right after.

It seems like her freshly-caught cold has gotten serious .

"Anyhow, I'll take over here, so get some rest inside."

Saki remained silent in thought for a few moments, but then she muttered with a slightly hoarse voice, "Okay ," and stood up. She staggered and leaned onto me.

Through her forehead she pressed against me, I felt her head. It was a little hot.

"Hey... are you feeling that bad?"

"Jeez, make out somewhere else," said Towako-san.

From where she was standing, we must have looked as though we were hugging each other.

"It looks like she's really caught a cold! Hey, pull yourself together!"

I patted Saki's cheeks to make her mind clear. With a weak nod, she went into the living room.

"Who knows? Maybe it's the statue's 'incurable disease ?'"

"No way," I put off Towako-san's joke.

"No way..."

His cough had grown worse and worse lately. His forehead was terribly hot when I checked. He had also started to drop things from time to time.

The symptoms were clear indications of the disease that had befallen this village.

That year's disease had spread vigorously and the sick lined up at our temple with no end in sight. Juan-sama was busy treating them.

I'm sure Juan-sama prioritizes the treatment of others over his own.

Bearing down my high respect for him, I scolded him,

Who shall look after the people if something happens to you ?

It was a lie.

I did not care about the village.

I merely didn't want to see him suffering.

But Juan-sama absolutely did not cure himself.

One day, the symptoms of the disease also appeared on me. The coughs of the first stage wouldn't grant me peace, and I had also came down with a fever. It wasn't going to take long until my body became numb.

"Come here, I shall cure your disease."

Juan-sama beckoned me over and held out his right hand.

However, I refused.

He wore a slightly surprised mien.

"Please do not worry about my humble self."

"Why would you say that?"

"Please, heal yourself before me."

"I am still all right."

"All right, you say? Are you not coughing all the time, milord? Do you not have a persistent fever? You cannot move freely anymore. Did you think I would not notice?"

"You may not believe it, but I have a strong body. It will go away in due time. I know myself best. I care much more about you. Quick, let me cure you."

"....."

"Please, do not cause me worry."

Upon hearing the word "worry", I almost followed him obediently. I did by no means wish to worry Juan-sama. I didn't want to see him worried.

Nevertheless, I refused.

If I accepted his treatment, he would certainly delay his own yet again. Perhaps he feared that he could use his right hand only a limited number of times, and was reluctant to use one time for himself.

If that was true, I had to have him heal himself first all the more.

"No matter what you say, I will not let you treat me before you treat yourself."

Upon realizing that my decision was unshakable, he finally told me.

That he could not heal himself with his right hand.

Three days had since passed.

There were no signs of recovery to Saki's condition.

Her coughs wouldn't stop and her fever wouldn't go down. Her thinking was evidently muddled, as she couldn't properly change clothes and did things like dropping her spoon when bringing herself to eat.

"Mm... looks nasty," moaned Towako-san when she left Saki's room after helping her change clothes.

"Does she feel unwell?"

"Mm? Yeah, that's also true, but I'm troubled by something else. There aren't anymore changes of clothing ..."

"Hah?"

"No, look, I left all the chores to Saki. Her fresh clothes ran out. For that matter, mine ran out, too."

"Haven't you washed them?"

"I'm no good at household tasks," she explained proudly.

I could only facepalm.

"Shall I assign that task to you?"

"I refuse."

"Eeh? You don't often get to wash two girls' clothes, you know? There's also pajamas and underwear among them!"

"I firmly refuse."

"What a square..."

"I just can't be bothered."

"Hmph, do as you like. Saki-chan's awoken just now, so pay her a visit. But don't stay too long, okay?"

Towako-san walked away with Saki's old clothes, whereas I entered her room.

It wasn't the first time I was in there, but it always felt bare to me. With an almost complete lack of furnishing, it

was quite the opposite of the overfilled shop. All there was was a desk, a wardrobe and a bed. No plushies, no posters.

She wore black most of the time, but her room was painted white. Under the current situation, it felt much like a hospital.

"Why are you staring around like that?" Saki complained while poking half her face out of the blanket.

"Just thought that you've got a really bleak room there. Do you want me to bring you the mandrake clock on my next visit?"

"I don't need that thing."

"I figured. Same here," I joked and sat down on the chair besides her bed, where Towako-san had probably sat. "How are you feeling?"

"Horrible."

"That's what you get from working even though you were sickly."

An ordinary cooling cloth had been placed on her forehead to cool down her heat a little. I played with the thought of writing "Meat" on it, but I refrained because that was an old chestnut.

However, having sensed danger because I reached out my hand, Saki quickly crawled away from me in her bed.

"I won't do anything, really."

"That's not it."

Saki poked her face out of the blanket and looked at me.

"I haven't bathed," she whispered so softly I could barely understand her.

"Mm? But you don't stin..."

I suffered a direct punch on the nose when I sniffed her scent. There was a lot more strength in that blow than as expected from the sick.

"I'm sorry."

"For? Your punch?"

"For not working. I have taken three days off so far, after all."

Maybe because the cold had softened her up, she apologized rather politely.

"Don't mention it. There's nothing to do anyway."

"Towako-san would get angry if she was listening!"

"But she isn't, so everything's fine."

"But I am, aren't I?"

I started around just to find out that Towako-san had returned without me noticing. She carried a bottle of mineral water. After tossing me the bottle, she told me to come to her afterwards and left.

"That's why I told you... you're too careless!"

Saki tried to open the PET bottle I handed her, but failed several times. Apparently she had no strength in her body. I snatched away the bottle to open it for her and returned it.

She sat up and greedily drank some water to satisfy her thirst.

Then, I noticed, somewhat surprised, what she was dressed like.

"What?"

"Nothing, just didn't know you were into that kind of thing."

Saki was wearing a brown pajama that looked like a costume. Now she just had to pull it over her head and she would have made a genuine tanuki.

"Towako-san didn't have any others... why couldn't it be black?"

"You're concerned about the color?!"

"What else?"

"Well, but there are no black tanukis, are there? Better go for a penguin."

"No, penguins have a white belly."

What's with the "no"? To begin with, tanukis also have white bellies.

When I pointed this out, she said, "Now that you say it . How careless of me."

That was no real reason for her to feel ashamed, but it seemed like her attachment to black allowed no compromises. ...What a meaningless conversation.

"Umm, well, let's put aside the your pajama. Anyhow, get some good rest! It'll get better tomorrow, I'm sure."

"Mm."

As I didn't want to exhaust her by staying too long, I stood up and walked toward the door.

"Ah, wait." Saki stopped me.

"Mm? Is there still anything?"

"No. Just...," she whispered in another direction in a voice I could barely hear, "......thanks."

Her fever must be the reason for her flushed cheeks.

To gloss over her embarrassment, she hurriedly raised the pet bottle to her lips, but a second later she coughed and spat the water on the blanket.

"Relax, relax."

I suspected the water had gone down the wrong way down. I laughed, and as I did, something caught my eye.

Red stains had appeared on her blanket.

"Eh?"

Before I knew it, my gaze was fixed on her.

Something red had stuck to the hand she was covering her mouth with.

Juan-sama taught me the details about his right hand.

I learned that his hand did not cure diseases and injuries, but was merely a medium through which he could impart his own life force.

In other words, if life force was water, his right hand would be a ladle to draw on it.

The life force he passed over to the one he touched animated the target's life force, allowing him to recover by his own natural healing powers.

That is why he could not resurrect the dead, and why parts that had died off due to a burn or a frostbite would stay that way.

The dead had no life force that could be animated.

That is why Juan-sama could not heal himself.

The amount of life force would not change by pouring it into himself.

It was then that I realized that his treatment equated to suicide.

Juan-sama told me that the amount of energy was petty and that it would only require a meal and a day rest to regain it.

He told me that healing the people was, as such, not suicide.

However, doing so with his weakening body was nothing but suicide.

From the day I learned about this, I started to send all the villagers back that sought Juan-sama's right hand.

I wanted him to have his peace.

I thoroughly explained the situation to the villagers.

That Juan-sama was afflicted with the same disease as they. That he could not heal himself with his right hand. And I also promised them to let them meet Juan-sama as soon as he recovered.

At first, they agreed, but as time went by, they grew suspicious.

Claiming that we willfully held back his power out of greed for money.

Claiming that we gave priority to those who paid us a large sum.

They forgot the favors Juan-sama had done to them and started to spread rumors as they liked.

I decided to seal Juan-sama off from the villagers even more .

He was all I cared about.

Of course I hadn't informed him about anything.

I told him that the plague was no more and that the people were in the best of health.

It hurt my heart to see his relieved face when he rejoiced, but I steeled myself and went ahead with the lie from start to finish.

While he was pacified, however, his condition worsened day after day—his coughing never stopping, his fever not going down—and eventually, he found himself barely able to eat or walk on his own.

One day, Juan-sama suddenly continued carving his statue of the Buddha with his unresponsive hands.

He scraped off the gilding of the statue he had treasured so much and applied hammer and chisel.

When I asked him why he would do that, he answered that he wanted to finalize the statue and bring it as close as possible to the Buddha he had met in his dream.

Juan-sama had considered the statue incomplete even though it had looked splendid in my eyes.

Day by day, he was absorbed in carving until late at night.

As though he wanted to waste not a day, not an hour, not a minute, not even a second, he hung on.

He worked as if hurried by something.

I did not even want to think about *what* hurried him.

He wouldn't listen when I told him out of worry to rest his body.

He was surrounded by an imposing aura.

Carving a statue of the Buddha is said to show one's belief in the Buddha.

Perhaps he was pleading the Buddha for rescue by cutting the statue as his own life was cut down.

He could save everyone, but no one could save him.

The only one able to save him was the Buddha.

What he did was an act of faith. Each stroke was proof of his faith in the Buddha.

Yet from time to time, it looked to me as though he was swinging a blade down on the Buddha.

Something must have been wrong with my eyes.

A few days later.

Juan-sama had brought his statue to completion.

The statue's expression was calm like a lake without a ripple , and perfectly clear like a cloudless and birdless sky.

Neither his impelling hurry, nor his imposing aura had appeared on the statue.

Only after seeing the statue in its completed form, could I understood that it had indeed been incomplete. Even though I was uneducated, I was able to assess of what masterful skill the statue was.

But what made it truly splendid in my eyes was its resemblance to him.

It was the Juan-sama that had appeared before me the time I opened my eyes on the verge of death by starvation and cold.

He would have surely denied it.

But the statue was no one else but Juan-sama.

His everything was in there.

It was an incarnation of himself.

—However, by the time he completed the statue, he had become unable to even leave his bed.

He had also started to cough up blood, and also often stained me with his blood when I looked after him.

When that happened, he would apologize for staining me, and wipe the blood off with his right hand.

With his right hand that had gotten skinny like a dead tree.

I could not help but shed tears when seeing him so weak.

Before I knew it, I could not endure the sight of him.

I knew how to save Juan-sama. But couldn't bring myself to tell him.

One day, he said to me:

"Cut off my right hand."

I—

I—was beside myself with joy.

Juan-sama had had the same idea as I!

I was delighted that he had also had this thought I couldn't bring myself to speak out.

I took the chisel he had used for carving and swung it down on his right arm. Again and again and again and again.

The only saving grace was that he could not feel any pain anymore.

After swinging the chisel down several dozen times, I finally succeeded in removing his right arm.

Then I took that arm and touched Juan-sama with it.

If he could not heal himself with his own right hand, I just had to make sure it was not his own hand anymore.

If it's not his own hand anymore, it could heal him just like anyone else.

May my life force reach him through this right hand.

As long as he recovers, I shan't care what happens to me.

Every drop of my life force shall be his.

—But Juan-sama wasn't healed of his disease.

Why?

Why did my life force not reach him?

That was wrong.

That couldn't be.

His right hand was supposed to save him now that it had been removed.

It was supposed to gain the capability of saving him when removed.

Juan-sama was looking up at me.

Juan-sama tried to tell me something.

"!!!"

I raised a shriek when I looked at Juan-sama.

Gushes of blood were streaming out of his severed elbow. His life force was streaming out.

Groveling on the floor with a severed arm and drenched in blood, he looked up at me.

Why has he lost his right arm?

—Because I cut his arm off.

Why is he groveling on the floor?

—Because I cut his arm off.

Why is he dying?

—Because I cut his arm off.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHH!!!"

In terror of what I had done, I rushed out of the temple.

What had I done?!

I had thought I could save Juan-sama.

That was all that had been in my head.

—I hadn't even considered the possibility of failure.

I sought help from the villagers.

But having rejected their pleas for salvation, no one helped me.

All they did was scream in surprise at my blood-stained appearance. However, there was one old woman who listened to my cry for help.

She was the grandmother of the child Juan-sama had saved a while ago. Unlike the others, she had been worried about Juan-sama and did not take him for granted when he became ill and unable to offer his services.

I took her to the temple.

The old woman keeled over upon seeing the gruesome sight.

In a pool of his own blood was the deceased body of Juan-sama.

And at his side was a statue of the Buddha that had watched over him on his deathbed.

I approached my master's corpse and clasped it in my arms.

I noticed a piece of paper in his kimono[1].

As I couldn't read, I asked the old woman to read it to me.

Upon learning that his thoughts hadn't been the same as mine, I burst into tears.

On that day, I lost my sight.

"Coughing, high fever, hemoptysis and difficulty moving ... very similar," said Towako-san with a serious face.

"Similar to what?"

"To the plague that is mentioned in the stories about the statue."

"If that thing were a Relic that gave this disease, how could we heal her?"

"I'm afraid I have yet to come across a case in which the incurable disease of that statue was healed."

"What if"? Accept it already. It's no fake. The thing in front of your eyes is a Relic that afflicts everyone who touches it with an incurable disease.

"Don't be down in the mouth! I said 'yet'. I'll sift through those documents some more."

"I'll help you."

I would have read those documents much earlier if I knew this was going to happen.

After shaking off the fear that we wouldn't make it in time, I got down to the documents Towako-san handed to me.

The documents were a summary of the traditional stories of the deserted village the statue was found at.

Apparently this was the research of people who were intrigued by the story about the statue that brought death by disease or cured any disease.

I started off with a relatively old document. It contained a lot of records of cases in which a priest healed the villagers through touch. While no case went as far as reviving the dead, there was a shit load of

stories about healing illnesses or wounds. Among those illnesses, there were some whose symptoms resembled that of Saki's.

"Mm?"

I stumbled upon a weird notation.

According to it, the priest was afflicted with the disease and left the scene for recuperation. Why would a priest that could heal any illness contract one and require recuperation?

Deeper into the documents, the priest stopped being mentioned altogether. Some said he died by disease, others said that he disappeared.

Who got mentioned in his place was his disciple and a statue that had apparently been the object of devotion at his temple.

The documents said that it was now the disciple with that statue going around healing the people.

But even further ahead in the writings, it was noted that a large number of people died from the epidemic because touching the statue was of no avail. The statue was said to have lost its power.

Reading on, the situation took a sudden turn and the people who touched the statue contracted a fatal disease.

At this point, the documents became rather vague and incoherent. It was just a rough compilation of stories from hearsay.

As I saw it, the priest hadn't had a special power, but the mysterious statue did, and the priest had only made it look as though he was healing the people with his touch.

I don't know what happened to the priest, but his disciple inherited the statue. The disciple, however, made no fuss about it and healed the people by letting them touch the statue.

So far, so good. The problem was what happened then.

Why did the statue suddenly stop healing the people and start afflicting them with some disease?

Perhaps, the story about its healing capabilities was a lie to begin with?

Or did its power change?

Or could it only develop healing power under special conditions?

This was mentioned nowhere.

Damn it, the answer could bring us closer to saving Saki...!

One of the documents contained an afterword in which the author took a stand on the subject.

"The statue is said to have a bizarre and abstract shape akin to a manifestation of hatred and lamentation. As a matter of fact, this description does match the appearance of the actual object. For a wonder, however, it appears that some claimed the statue depicted a peaceful Buddha.

Perhaps, this statue was some sort of vessel that acted as a substitute for the people. Thus, by absorbing the illnesses and wounds of countless self-important people, the statue was under constant defilement until its

appearance eventually changed from the Buddha to a wicked devil.

Am I the only one with this view?"

Perhaps, we humans are in its debt? One we can only make up for if the same number of people die as were saved...?

Suddenly, I perceived a silent cough from Saki's room.

To see how she was, I entered.

The girl on the bed was wax-pale in the face in spite of the heat seizing her body. She seemed to be asleep, but time and again, she was shaken by a fit of coughing.

I outstretched my hands to fix her blanket, when suddenly, something ran through my head.

My vision almost went blank.

I didn't want to see it. I absolutely did not want to see a future that originated from this situation.

But that wish of mine was ignored.

I have no say about when "Vision" activates.

A painful noise ran through my head—

Saki, collapsed on the floor, gazed at me with wistful eyes.

Wanting to fly to her side, I dashed off, but I tripped over something.

Beside my feet lay that accursed statue.

I kicked it away and rushed to Saki's side.

Her eyes were half-closed and trying to regain focus in vain.

Even though she was looking directly at me, she couldn't see me.

Saki opened her mouth in the attempt to say something.

What came out was not her voice, however, but a mouthful of blood.

Trying to form words nonetheless, she opened her bloodstained mouth yet again.

However, her words did not reach me, and with a shiver of her lips, she——

"Did you... see something?"

"!"

I came to.

Saki had woken up without me noticing and was gazing at me.

My heart was beating like mad.

I can still make it. In the future I've seen, Saki collapsed on the floor, but right now she's in her bed. In the future I've seen , Saki's eyes had lost focus, but right now she's looking at me. Her eyes do have focus. She can clearly see me.

That future was not now.

There was still time.

I didn't know when it was going to happen. But not now. Definitely not now.

"...D-Did I wake you up?" Ignoring her question, I fixed her blanket.

"Answer me. Did you see something?"

I nodded at the question she repeated.

"Yeah... I saw your driveling, slack-jawed face while you were asleep!" I forced out a laugh.

As awkward as as an old, unoiled machine.

Having fixed her blanket and unable to endure being in her room any longer, I left as if escaping.

"You're a bad liar."

Her hoarse whisper remained in my ears.

I did not have the time to yield to despair.

I had to succeed his will.

The statue he had carved until his death.

The statue he had left to me.

The statue that had taken on the power of his right hand.

The statue that tied us together.

With that very statue, I had to save the people.

I took the statue and left the mountain.

I sensed their looks of suspicion and respect in the air.

But I did not mind.

I asked if there was anyone ill within the village.

I learned that there was an old man who had been sick in bed for a month and visited him.

Scathingly, his daughter asked for my business. It was obvious that she held a grudge because I had refused her cry for help when she had come to the temple.

"I am here to save you."

"What can **you** do? Where is Juan-sama? Go fetch him!"

"Rest assured. This statue shall save your father. He just has to touch it."

Whether my last words had taken effect, or she wanted to clutch even at straws remains unknown, but she gave in easier than I had expected and led me into their dwelling.

The coughing of her old man came into range. It seemed like it was the epidemic, after all.

I sat down next to the old man and took his hand.

In that instance, he was attacked by a coughing fit. Something dripped from my face the next moment.

It was no doubt blood.

"Please forgive me. It must have been excruciating. But please be assured that this statue will heal you."

I pressed his hand against the statue.

After I had done so, the coughing of this man with labored breath stopped at once.

He sat up like nothing had happened and his eyes widened in astonishment.

The daughter and a few villagers who had come as onlookers overwhelmed me with words of admiration.

This scene was much alike our first visit to this village when we had saved a child.

Of course it was alike.

For it was symbolically the same incident once again.

"You are well now."

"Aah... Ah...!" The old man moaned in appreciation and quickly wiped off the blood he had coughed onto me.

"You needn't concern yourself over it," I assured gently.

He grasped my hand and expressed his gratitude again and again.

Wonderment spread among the villagers.

"What happened?"

"How can this be explained?"

"Almost as if Juan-sama touched him!"

I turned around to them and explained it to them:

"This statue is the incarnation of Juan-sama."

From then on I regained their trust bit by bit, devoting myself to curing them.

I had to heal one after another as if this was the payback for turning them down in the past. The news left the village and attracted people from the surrounding villages or even farther away.

Of course I did not reject them.

I healed hundreds and thousands of their wounds and diseases.

I intended to save everyone who was still to come.

Like my master had done.

Like was his will.

"Help please! My child! My child has a fever!"

That day, too, a villager came and knocked at the temple entrance.

The child in her arms was breathing painfully and coughing between its gasps. The child's forehead was incredibly hot when I felt the temperature.

"Please, save my child with the statue...!"

"Follow me."

I asked the woman and her child in.

With a breath of relief, she entered the temple.

"The statue! Where is the statue?" she urged me while looking around for the statue.

Upon finding the statue placed on its altar, she made a dash to retrieve it.

"Stop!" I yelled with a sharp tongue.

The woman stopped with a startled face.

"You must not touch it rashly. Only the sick and I may touch it."

It was my treasured statue Juan-sama had left behind to me.

I could not let anyone break or steal it. Even if it was a desperate mother anxious about her child's life, I didn't allow anyone to touch it rashly.

"F-Forgive my rudeness."

I went to take the statue down from the altar and returned to the child.

"Your child will be as fit as a fiddle right away!"

I let the child touch the statue.

The coughing stops, the fever drops and the patient stands up in the best of health—normally.

However, all of a sudden the child had a furious coughing bout.

"Gh! Ghh!.... Ghg! Ghgu!... Ugh!"

"?"

What happened?

Why did the disease not disappear?

I made the child touch the statue once again.

"...Ueh...uhh! ...Gh, Gh! ...Ghghugh!"

The coughing got even worse. The child painfully started thrashing its arms and legs about.

Not only did the coughing get worse, the child also started to cough up blood. I felt blood sticking to my face and body, but I was at a loss of what to do.

"What's going on? Pull yourself together! Go! Save my child!!" the woman yelled furiously.

At once, the coughing stopped and so did the child's frenzy.

Ah, the disease is gone.

The moment I thought so—

The woman cried out at the top of her lungs.

I didn't know what had happened.

But rumors started to spread in the village.

Rumors of my failing at saving that child.

However, they weren't harmful for me.

The fact that I had saved hundreds and thousands couldn't be turned over just by one failure. His right hand and his statue were not able to bring back the dead, and everyone knew that.

Hence, with the assumptions that the disease had progressed too far already, and that the child had been beyond help, that case was dismissed. Or that's how things were supposed to be.

However, things took a different turn.

"Gh, ughhu! .... GH! Gh! Ugh! Geho! Gho!... Ughe!"

Again.

Again, someone who touched the statue wasn't healed, but started to show even graver symptoms than before. He was attacked by a fit of coughing, then coughed up blood and eventually died.

I felt the people's questioning gazes on me.

But I was unable to provide an answer.

I wondered what had happened to the statue.

What had changed it?

"May we get an explanation?"

This was the first thing I heard when visiting the head of the village on his call.

"Among those who died after touching that statue, there were certainly some who may have been beyond help. But is that really the truth? Weren't there some who could still be saved?" he asked.

"I don't..."

I had no answer. I could only remain silent.

"I told you so!"

Suddenly, a voice from somewhere broke the silent.

I heard the onlookers go aside, and someone stand before me.

It was the old woman who had followed me to the temple the day I cut off Juan-sama's right hand.

"I saw it! I saw Juan-sama's death! But it was not a natural death. He was killed. Minced with a chisel..."

"That story again? Don't spread such a..."

"It's no lie! I've seen it with my very eyes. Well...? No one believed me."

Indeed, for her it might have looked as though Juan-sama had been killed with that chisel. And she could easily guess that I was killer, seeing that I was stained with blood.

She told the villagers about it, but no one believed her because I healed countless people.

But this time it was different. They had doubts.

The ranks behind her started to blame me:

"She was right after all!", "It's Juan-sama's curse!", "He's taking revenge on us because you killed him!"

However, there were also some who stood up for me:

"Our child was saved by that statue!", "Juan-sama would have never thought of revenge!", "Those who died were already beyond hope anyway."

"There seems to be a variance of opinion among the villagers. I, too, want to believe you. But it's not possible to have no doubts at this point. I'd like to ask for proof. Proof for that statue's healing abilities. Proof that no one died because of that statue."

"Does my life not prove it?"

I held the statue aloft with my hands.

If he had left behind a curse, then he would kill me immediately.

If this statue killed, then it would kill me immediately.

But that didn't happen.

Was it not the ultimate proof that I didn't die from touching the statue?

"Heh, I bet there is some trick to it," ridiculed the old woman.

"Have you not also read the letter Juan-sama left behind?"

"You wrote it yourself and hid it in his clothes, didn't you?" Her doubts were firmly established. "Juan-sama was an admirable person, yes he was! Heaven knows how many times he saved my children and grandchildren. I nearly thought he was Buddha himself!"

So had I. No, I had thought so even more than she.

"Do you know the tale of the man... who killed a god?"

"?"

"Long ago when a god still dwelt in this region, there was a man who slayed that god. Soaked in the godly blood of a deity,

the sword gained a mysterious power and that dull man, who had been unable to maintain his weapon properly, suddenly won fame in battle. But one day, an outlaw broke into his house. The man drew his sword in order to protect his family, but his sword could not cut his opponent. Of splendid sharpness on the battlefield, the sword could now not even cut a burglar, no, not even into his skin. The man and his family were slayed in the outlaw's place.

The godly blood gave power to the sword. But the god did not for a second forget his wrath against the man who slayed him. It was divine punishment. The moment he wanted to protect the ones most dear to him—the moment the sword had to cut better than ever—the sword betrayed him and lost its sharpness.

Do you get the meaning of this tale? It is about you!"

"Eh?"

"You killed Juan-sama and soaked that statue in his blood, didn't you? Did you fancy his power and want to imitate him?"

"N-No! I would never..."

"Just feign ignorance if you will. But do realize that the deaths caused by the statue have already proven me right! It's Juan-sama's curse. No... it's divine punishment! Juan-sama is trying to punish you!"

The old woman slapped the statue away from my hands.

"W-What have you done to the statue he left behind?!"

"Heh, just take a look at your statue. What was once crafted to heavenly beauty, is now rearing a malicious grimace! Open your eyes, everyone. How long are you going to let her deceive you? His punishment is going to hit you if you don't wake up!"

I sensed fear welling up and heard them step back.

"Please, someone pick up the statue for me!" I cried out for help, but no one picked it up.

It was seven days later that the old woman died of disease.

It was also the day I lost their trust.

The moment I arrived at the living room, I slumped to the ground.

As I closed my eyes, I recalled the horrible future " Vision" had shown to me.

"Vision"?

So it shows the future?!

Oh, but I can guess as much as to what's going to happen to her by myself! What's the point in seeing that future now?

Why didn't it show me before Saki touched the statue?!

The statue caught my eye.

The hateful statue that was about to claim Saki's life.

The creepy statue that just stood still inside its glass case as if it didn't know what it had done.

I reached for the glass case.

Perhaps, I'll see another future when I'm about to touch it?

Perhaps, "Vision" will show me my death?

Perhaps, I'll find a hint to save Saki?

I was about to pull off the gloves I had been told to wear, when someone's hands stopped mine. Towako-san was standing beside me.

"Don't attempt to touch it directly."

"I'm not going to touch it! I'm just pretending to, you know...?"

"You'll die."

My excuses stayed in my throat when I sensed the weight of her words. I couldn't honestly tell if my hand would have stopped without Towako-san's intervention or a warning by a Vision.

"Any new discoveries?" I asked her.

Towako-san shook her head silently.

I felt my body slacken due to that letdown.

"Tokiya... why do you go to such lengths?"

The tone in her voice criticized my attempt to touch the statue.

"Because if I don't do something, she's going to..."

"Even so."

"Because, look, she's..."

She's, what? Sure, we've gone through a lot, but it's only been a year since we met. Right now we're only coworkers. That's all there is to our relationship.

But my feelings didn't agree.

I felt that we had known each other much longer.

I felt that our bonds were much deeper.

There was no reason.

I couldn't explain it.

Anyhow, it was inconceivable for me to lose Saki. No, not quite. The thought of losing her bereft me of my composure. Just by thinking about it, I almost collapsed to the ground, shaken by an unbearable hollowness.

I didn't know why.

But contrary to my rationality, my feelings screamed out like that.

...And yet I was powerless.

"...Ngh!"

I smashed the statue along with its case off the table.

The case burst to smithers and the statue rolled down the floor. The living room was covered by shards and a fragment that had broken off from the statue.

"Don't take it out on a Relic. Relics just exist. They are not to blame."

"Then who is?! Saki, for touching it?!"

"No," Towako-san shook her head again. "I am to blame. Because I brought it here."

"......!"

Unable to refute her claim, I stepped on the fragment of the Relic.

"You didn't find out anything, either?" she asked.

I wouldn't be here now if I did.

"All I originally wanted is to do some research about those contradicting traditions...," Towako-san said in a slightly saddened voice.

"...Did its power change perhaps, I wonder?" I suggested

"I've never heard of a Relic whose power changed."

If not its power, *what* changed on that statue?

Why did it suddenly start to kill the people when it had saved them?

"Is... something wrong...?"

Saki showed up, leaning against the door. Probably, she had come to see what had caused the noise.

She was still as pale as before, and visibly had a hard time standing. No, that "still" was just a comfortable lie. She looked much worse than before.

"What are you doing? Be good and stay..."

Before I could end my sentence, Saki fell to her knees. As she grabbing her chest painfully, she coughed several times. I was seized by a bad presentiment.

Saki collapsed to the ground. She raised her face a little and gazed at me with wistful eyes.

"Saki!"

Wanting to fly to her side, I dashed off, but tripped over something.

Beside my feet lay that accursed statue.

I kicked it away. The statue bounced against the wall and landed right before Saki's eyes.

"!"

An inexpressibly cold shiver ran down my back.

This was nothing else but the future "Vision" had shown to me.

In my vision, Saki lay collapsed.

She gazed at me with wistful eyes.

I tripped because of that accursed statue.

I kicked away the statue.

There were more than enough indications.

It's the same. No. It's the same! No!

Two voices denied each other in my head.

I shook them off and headed toward Saki.

She was desperately trying to stand up and coughing countless times. A blood drop ran down the hand she covered her mouth with and dripped on the statue.

The next moment she almost collapsed on top of the statue, but I quickly caught her. I feared that she'd be done for if she touched the statue one more time.

Again she coughed, spitting blood at my face.

"...I am...sorry..."

Saki tried to get away from me, almost falling to ground again, but this time Towako-san sustained her.

"...Wash off the blood... it might be contagious..."

Saki tried to wipe away the blood on my face with her fingers. Her hand was, however, also covered in blood.

"I only... made it... worse."

She suddenly let her hand fall down. As it nearly touched the statue, Towako-san fixed her hold in a hurry.

Did the people back then also lost their lives like this?

Seeking rescue, getting betrayed?

And did even more have to watch helplessly as they died?

The moment I raised my leg to kick it away from Saki's reach, I noticed that her blood drop soaked through the statue.

"!"

No, that was wrong. The blood hadn't soaked through. It had stuck to the statue's surface as was normal. It was just that the blood almost had the same color as the surface.

Something attracted my attention.

"Tokiya?"

I left Saki to Towako-san and picked up the statue with my gloves. Then I wiped off Saki's blood with my finger. The leftovers of her blood were distributed on the surface.

This time the color harmonized completely and made it disappeared for good.

The statue had saved the lives of thousands upon thousands.

The plague started with coughing and continued with throwing up blood. In the end, the sick fell into paralysis and died.

How many times had the statue been touched by the sick seeking aid?

"_____!"

Towako had said that the power of Relics didn't change.

Therefore, I had assumed one of two the myths had been a lie.

But what if neither had been wrong?

What if the statue's power was neither to cure diseases nor to inflict terminal diseases, but something that brought about those varying effects as a consequence?

So if its power didn't changed, what did?

It had been mentioned in the documents:

The statue is said to have a bizarre and abstract shape akin to a manifestation of hatred and lamentation. There also appear to be some who stated that the statue had depicted a peaceful Buddha.

In other words:

Its power didn't changed.

Its appearance did.

Stained by the infested, contagious fluids of thousands upon thousands that had been ravaged by disease.

My smashing the statue earlier had opened lots of cracks here and there, as well as torn off part of its surface layer.

What appeared under it, was—

"————....."

I regained my dwindling consciousness. Apparently, I had passed out.

I heard a beam fall nearby.

I heard a column fall over from a distance.

The sound and heat told me that the fire could not be stopped anymore.

It appears that they had decided to burn me to death.

I did not fear death.

On the contrary, I was rather delighted to go to where he was.

My only regret was that I had been unable to succeed his will.

In the letter he had bequeathed to me, he asked me to substitute his right hand with the statue and save the people in his place.

Doing his bidding, I saved as many as I could.

But in the end, I became unable to save their lives and thus betrayed him. No, I was even suspected to kill people.

I didn't find out to the bitter end why the statue lost its healing power.

The only thing I could think of was it being a punishment from Heaven.

For my blasphemous disbelief.

For my presumptuous attempt to supersede Juan-sama.

Still, there was no moment when I stopped saving the people .

For honoring his last will took precedence over all else, even if it meant making the Gods my enemy.

Urging my near-paralyzed body to move, I tore out a floorboard and started to dig a hole.

Ignoring my tearing skin, my bleeding fingertips, my breaking fingernails, I kept digging with my numb hands.

It was a small hole, but enough to protect the statue.

I would have liked to put it in a case or the like, but there wasn't enough time.

In the past, I had polished this statue every day to preserve its luster. He had always been delighted by that.

But now it was dirty with soil. Dirty with the blood I must have coughed onto it. No, it had been stained much earlier. The statue had been stained by all the blood the sick had spit at it. It must have soaked in a boundless amount of blood.

Suddenly, I received a blow to the head.

Part of the ceiling had collapsed. But I didn't feel any pain. Instead, a curious sensation attacked me.

A distorted image appeared in my sightless eyes.

What I saw in this distorted image was the sight of the temple burning down.

Was this a trick of fate?

Because of the blow against the back of my head, my sight—which I had lost along with my master on that day—returned temporarily.

If possible, I would have wanted my vision to stay black.

I didn't want to see the temple where I had lived together with my master being reduced to ashes.

I didn't want this to be the last thing I saw in my lifetime.

I averted my eyes from the burning temple and looked at the statue in my hands.

I intended to sear the statue's face that was so much alike his into my memory—

—I lost my train of thought.

What is this?

The statue in my hands was far from the statue I knew.

The statue that had worn a mien calm like a lake without a ripple and perfectly clear like a cloudless and birdless sky had turned into a disgusting, unsightly dark red chunk.

I realized immediately that it was blood.

The blood of the hundreds and thousands the statue had saved, had stuck to it. This fact had not escaped my notice back then, of course. I had had a feeling that the statue was stained with blood.

Therefore, I had polished the statue each and every day as good as I could.

But due to my blindness and my unfeeling hands, I had failed to wipe all of it off. The blood of hundreds and thousands had stuck to the statue countless times and layer after layer until one day, the statue was completely covered.

I recalled the old woman's words.

What was once crafted to heavenly beauty, is now rearing a malicious grimace!

At the time, I had thought it had been a spiteful lie.

But now I know that it had been the truth.

And now I also know why the statue had stopped saving people.

The surrounding blood had sealed its healing power off. No, even worse; the blood had been reanimated and, being a derivative of disease, brought about death to the people.

I roused to destroy that disgusting statue.

—But I couldn't do it.

I could not destroy the statue made by him.

If possible, I would have wanted to remove the coating of blood, but I had not left enough time.

The blood was disgusting, but it also represented the vast number of people who had been saved by it.

After expressing my gratitude and begging forgiveness to the statue and Juan-sama, I buried it in the hole—with the wish that someone might find and return it to its former appearance one day.

How insolent.

Despite not believing in the gods, I had made a wish.

And still I couldn't help praying.

Praying that someone might succeed his and my will, and save as many as he can...

In a word, it was an eerie statue.

What had looked like oxidized copper and rotten wood at first glance, revealed a golden shine underneath the dark coating.

What had given off an eerie impression much like seeing faces in trees or walls because of its bizarre shape, turned out to really depict a Buddha underneath the dark coating.

The rest of red coating that had come off from the blow could with ease be peeled off bit by bit. When I was done removing it, what I had held before my eyes was a statue worthy of being worshipped at a temple, albeit its gilding had come off here and there.

Apparently, it had been blood that covered the golden statue. A vast amount of blood had been smeared on it and set. I assumed it was the blood of the hundreds and thousands who had touched the statue to heal their diseases.

I picked up the undefiled statue and rushed to Saki.

Even though there was no confirmation, I took the statue to her and pressed it against the collapsed girl.

Immediately after, her high fever broke, her wild breath calmed down, and her chronic coughing came to an end all at once.

By touching the statue that had afflicted her with disease, she was released from the disease.

Just as had been recorded in the early stories surrounding the statue—

On another day, I asked her, "In the end, what was that statue?"

"Well, this is only my personal view, so take it with a grain of salt," she prefaced her explanation.

According to her guess, rather than healing diseases and wounds, the statue could stimulate one's life force and one's bodily healing power.

In other words, in error the statue animated the disease-causing germs in the surrounding blood and infected everyone who touched it with a disease or sharpened the present disease.

"We can't know for sure, though," she closed.

There were numerous other questions that arose.

Why did the priest and his disciple not wipe off the blood? Where did the priest disappear to? And where did the disciple go after leaving behind the statue?

Perhaps, he fled because the statue couldn't fulfill its purpose anymore? Perhaps, he himself died because of the statue?

However, the documents did not cover these issues.

Therefore, we could only picture it to ourselves.

The only thing the documents told us was that the village that had been ravaged by that plague did not exist anymore.

Perhaps the village had been doomed the moment the statue lost its original power.

"But the fact that it has saved countless people persists, " Saki said as she reached out for the statue that had almost claimed her life.

A crack had opened in the golden statue, probably because I had smashed it on the ground.

That straight vertical crack looked more like a slit that had been there from the beginning.

Suddenly, with a pop and creak, the crack opened wider and wider still, and, soon enough, the statue broke in half.

The statue had apparently been hollowed out with a chisel or something, and concealed something that now came to light.

It was completely shriveled as though all its life force had been drawn out—or its purpose had been achieved.

Withered like a dead branch—

Inside the statue appeared—

A right hand.

1. ↑ A Japanese traditional garment.

Chapter 3 - Memories and Notes

The word memory means "past experience retained in the mind." The scientific definition reads "information from outside the human body stored within the human body by copying the data into the synapses of the biological neural network".

But knowing that doesn't make my memory any better .

If I consider the outcome of poor memorization, well, the result of the exams becomes a very unpleasant affair.

Unlike the nationwide mock exams that test your knowledge, the midterms and finals test whether you paid attention during class.

Good grades don't really mean much to me. I'm okay as long as I can avoid supplementary exams. Memorizing the school books is enough to get me there.

Except that *that's* exactly what's so terrible and difficult to accomplish.

Are there no easier methods to remember things?

Come to think of it, I heard that you can remember anything if you write it on a note and eat it. I once gave it a shot for an exam.

...I suffered from an upset stomach for my trouble.

Why do I address this subject?

Well, because a teacher, who had already finished marking our exams, made a certain remark as I was leaving.

"The supplementary exam will cover the same subjects . Prepare yourself accordingly."

Right, then. Today's dinner is a bundle of memos.

But just where do I get them...?

...do photocopies also count?

My mother passed at the hospital after falling down the stairs at home.

Death by accident. Her death was set aside with those three words.

But I had seen the truth.

I saw. Through a gap in the door of the room I'd been locked into, I saw. With swollen cheeks and bereft of clothes, I saw.

I saw him push her down.

I desperately tried to get a hearing, but no one believed me.

The truth is going to fade away and be forgotten.

I will forget before long, too.

I have a bad memory, so I will forget.

I don't want to.

I mustn't.

So I wrote it down.

In a notebook my mother had once given to me along with the advice that I should record everything that I absolutely didn't want to forget inside it.

It was not just a memento of her.

It was a special notebook—different from those I usually used—whose contents I never forget.

Therefore, I recorded it.

In order not to forget, I recorded it.

I recorded the truth behind my mother's death.

...Someone's here. Sheesh. It might be him. He'll destroy this if he finds it. I'll forget if he does.

I don't want to.

I mustn't.

The door opened slowly.

It was his hands.

He had come, after all.

I closed the notebook and looked for a place to hide it. However, I couldn't decide on a place because none seemed certain.

The door was still being opened.

With my gaze I compared the notebook that contained the truth of her death and the slowly opening door.

There was no time.

I tore off the page I had just written, pushed it into my mouth and gulped it down.

I concealed the truth of her death in my stomach.

Now I won't forget.

I won't forget for the rest of my life.....

.....

A while after waking up, I was so confused that I didn't know where I was.

I felt as though my consciousness had been gotten caught in between dream and reality.

After gazing at the patterns in the wooden ceiling for a few moments, I got a clear mind.

It took me a few more minutes to recognize that I lived here.

Fragments of my memories from before waking up were still in my head.

I'd had a dream.

But I had forgotten what it was about in these few minutes.

Leaving me with an irksome feeling, the memory of the dream had disappeared.

What kind of dream was it?

This memory wasn't going to return,

Unless I made a note, I couldn't recall memories that had disappeared.

Again. As always.

I couldn't recall things I wanted to recall.

Even though I couldn't forget things I wanted to forget.

I had trouble coping with the frustration of my helplessness.

I buried my face in the pillow and covered myself under the blanket, curling up in the darkness.

The moment my vision went black, a miracle occurred along with a sensation of sparks flying.

—I remembered. I remembered my dream.

It was a dream of my past.

At the same time, it also answered my question.

I finally realized why I couldn't forget it.

Because of exams, there were no afternoon classes.

I was, despite everything, a mere student and, naturally, went to school. Since I went to school, I naturally also took classes. Since I took classes, I naturally also had to take exams when the time arrived.

And, since I had to take exams, I naturally also had to take supplementary exams. Right. "Naturally." I disregard any opinions that claim otherwise.

Anyway, I went to the shop a little early even though my shift was scheduled for evening like always. I planned on studying for the supplementary exam the next day. Am I not diligent?

To my surprise, however, there was a customer.

It was extremely rare for someone else to be present other than the owner, Towako-san, or my workmate, Saki. One could take the shop's lack of customers for granted. One might ask, "What the hell?," but I've had enough of that question.

From her appearance, the unexpected customer was in her early twenties. However, her presence made her seem a little older. She seemed fragile somehow, or insecure. The sad expression on her face may have augmented that impression.

Listening to her at a table that was for sale—a fake of a table with the ability of keeping everything on it even when flipping the table over like the pops of the showa era loved to do—was Towako-san.

Since when did we offer counseling?

That moment, Saki came out of the living room with a tray of black tea and our eyes met.

"Quite rare that we have a customer, huh?"

"It's an acquaintance of an acquaintance of Towako-san ."

I thought about asking her for some black tea as well, but without leaving me any opportunity to enjoy some tea, Towako-san beckoned me over, "You came at just the right time. Tokiya, take a seat!"

I didn't know what "right time" it was, but I obediently sat down next to her. The woman on the other side greeted me with a nod, but looked a little perplexed.

"This is my part-timer. And this is Etsuko Uwajima," Towako-san introduced us to each other. "She's come here because of a problem she has. Join me in listening to her."

She loved to bargain over a Relic she was eyeing, but apparently she was bored of listening to someone's problems and planned on pushing the job onto me.

While I didn't have enough experience to counsel an adult woman, I wasn't so immature as to decline.

"All right, I am sorry, but may I ask you to start all over again?"

Etsuko-san nodded without seeming offended, and started calmly.

"To tell the truth, there is something I just can't seem to forget."

"Aha..."

"I have a bad memory and often forget things. This is due to the brain damage I received in a traffic accident when I was young."

Unsure what to say, I nodded vaguely. She continued without minding.

"I have absolutely no memory of anything before the accident. The memories right after the accident, too, have become very vague. I remember almost nothing from that period. Apparently, the portion of the brain that manages my memories was damaged in the accident.

Moreover, I don't only forget about my past, but I am also very forgetful about everything," she said and gave a few examples to elaborate. "I immediately forget things like faces or the locations of shops I frequent. Sometimes, I forget to take my money at the bank or to wrap my purchases even though I take the change. Also, one time I was searching for something but forgot what I was looking for in the process. It's been like this since I was a child, and because of that I was often scolded. In elementary school, for example, I set the record of forgetting something one week in a row. ...Or was it two weeks? No, three weeks?"

She talked rather leisurely, or "other-wordly" perhaps. As a side note, she took a whole five minutes for the explanation so far. That should give an idea of just how sluggishly—excuse me, I mean how leisurely her way of speaking was.

I had taken a side-glance at Towako-san, but she pretty much allowed the explanation go in one ear and out the other. For her, that pace and nature had to be hard to endure.

Suddenly, the woman took a laptop out of her bag and started to look something up.

What was so important to pause and look it up?

"...Ah, it was in high school. I remember now."

She had checked *that* up as it seemed. Had she stored her personal history on that laptop or something?

To be honest, I didn't give a shit. To begin with, didn't she kinda recall the wrong part there?

"Ah, but it's not like I forget each and every thing. I can memorize things like the multiplication tables or how to buy tickets."

Amnesia only involves forgetting part of one's experiences, like one's memories, but does not include bare knowledge. Besides, memorization itself doesn't decrease, so new memories are retained just fine.

Apparently, it's like the way to the old memories is being cut off.

In her case, it might have been something similar.

"Anyhow, once my mother, concerned about me, told me that I could memorize things if I wrote them on a notepad and ate it. When I tried it out, I really became

able to memorize all kinds of things. Since then I have been eating notes to fight against my forgetfulness. I can keep things in mind quite a long time thanks to that. Quite the progress, isn't it?"

Like I care.

"So?"

"Yes?"

"..."

"..."

"...Um, is something wrong?" I asked.

Etsuko-san was holding her cheek and cocking her head absent-mindedly.

"Hello?" I asked again, upon which she peeked into my face.

"Excuse me, but what have I been talking about?"

Can I go home already?

"...and that's where you stopped."

I went to the trouble of repeating what she had said.

"Ah, I see," she said as she clapped her hands together with a beaming smile.

"Um, so what concern brings you here today?"

"Yes, listen please. As I said, I am still memorizing things by eating memos, and those memories fade away after a while, but there is one memory I just can't seem to forget. I really want to, but I can't..."

"Aha..."

"This is the notebook I mentioned."

With these words, Etsuko-san pointed at a notebook on the table.

It was soft to the touch and of high quality, and had a binding made of Japanese paper. Just, apart from that it

was a boringly normal A4 notebook that contained unlined blank pages. If I had to tell if it looked tasty or not, well, no, it didn't. Although that was no problem.

Unsure how to react, I looked to the side. Towako-san gave me a nod. That's when I realized that this notebook was a Relic.

"I once had an acquaintance of mine show it to me. Probably there's no doubt."

"What kind of power does it have?"

"You don't forget anything you note down in it. Whatever is written in there remains in your memory—no matter how much time passes, word for word."

So in short, I guess she's written something in it and can't forget it anymore.

"As soon as you've written something, is it really impossible to forget it?"

"No, you just have to erase it to revoke its effect. You can use an eraser or even just strike it out."

"Hey, then it's quite the simple task."

If she was unable to forget that memory, we just had to erase the corresponding text.

"Just, you know...," she sighed and showed me the opened notebook.

I saw the traces of torn-off pages.

"She's eaten the note."

"Exactly," the woman nodded in agreement.

A notebook that lets you remember everything you write in it.

A notebook that lets you forget something again if you erase it.

Then what happens if one were to eat a page?

"Dunno, no one has ever tried," Towako-san explained curtly. "But sweet Jesus, this is the first time I heard of

someone *eating* a Relic! You never know what happens in life, though, and that's what makes it fun."

"Eating a memo isn't new, though."

That eating a memo will enable you to remember anything you've written on it is just a superstition some fool came up with when he was driven into a corner by his exams. But there are people who have to rely on this kind of superstition (*I'm one to talk...*).

She happened to be one of these people as well.

And in her case, she happened to have eaten a memo from a Relic.

"Normally, it's a really simple item... you remember what you write, and if you don't need it anymore, you just erase it," Towako-san said.

"If erasing does the trick, perhaps she'll forget when the note is digested?" I suggested.

"Unless she's eaten it today, it should be long digested by now."

"Then maybe in her shi—UGH!"

"We're eating."

Saki hit me with a tray. With good reason.

We were having a slightly late lunch. Saki's homemade cod roe spaghetti.

Only I, Saki and Towako-san were sitting around the lunch table. We had noted down Etsuko-san's contact information and sent her on her way.

The notebook itself was still here, as we were going to investigate it.

Etsuko Uwajima-san. 21 years old.

She had received the notebook from her mother when she was young and was told to write everything in it she didn't want to forget. We didn't know how her mother had obtained the notebook, nor did we know if she had known about Relics, but, at the very least, she seemed to have been aware of its power.

She had passed away ten years ago. Apparently, she had slipped on the stairs and fallen badly, resulting in her death. Her parents were divorced, so the father had

not been there. I couldn't ask for details about her family environment, but I guessed it was a rather complicated one. At the moment she lived alone. Her address was about three stations from here. That was about all we knew about her.

"She remembers stuff like this, huh."

Despite her lackluster memory, she was able to tell us these things rather easily. Well, for part of it she had used her computer, though.

"Keep in mind that there are two factors you must distinguish. Otherwise you'll get confused," Towako-san said.

"I am already. So, what factors do you mean?"

"First, she lost her memory due to an accident, which has also made her memories thereafter ambiguous and uncertain."

"The other one?" I asked.

"She's simply forgetful from nature."

"Yeah, she was quite the airhead..."

I looked at Saki. Wasn't she also an airhead in a sense?

"What?" She looked back at me expressionlessly upon noticing my gaze.

"No, nothing."

I turned back to Towako-san.

"I'm no expert in this field either, so I'm basing this on common knowledge and my own guesswork," she started, "A human brain has a short-term memory and a long-term memory. Furthermore, the latter consists of the episodic memory, used for recollections, and the semantic memory, used for factual knowledge. None of this is new to you, right?"

"Right."

Never heard of it.

"The accident probably damaged her long-time memory. I guess it's true that she can remember almost nothing from her past, but in her computer she has a decent amount of data that fills in the gaps. That's why she remembers her mother for example."

So the hard disk of her computer is supplementing her brain ?

"And as for why she forgets to take her money at the bank and had forgotten things during elementary school, well, she's a scatterbrain. It's not just her—these things can happen to everyone. Everyone forgets his or her short-term memory within a few minutes, after all. It's just that normally, you repeat those things in mind or look at a memo, so you can store it in your long-term memory. A scatterbrain tends to neglect doing so, or just gets distracted with something else."

Does that mean that I can't remember anything from classes because it never reaches the long-term memory? I don't study at home after all.

"In her explanation, she mixed the damage of her memory and her forgetfulness, which made her story incoherent. Looks like she didn't notice it herself, though. At any rate," she sighed, "The notebook Relic makes her remember things without paying heed to her mind structure."

"So, what do we do?"

"Well, I think I'll solve her problem. It's rude to leave her to her own devices after accepting her request for advice. Besides, there's a reward. A reward!"

The ratio is 1:3, huh... That's how bad our sales are.

"But is there really a need to do anything? After all, she has written it into her notebook because she *didn't want* to forget."

"Presently, she wants to forget. Although I don't know *what*."

Right. In the end, we couldn't find out *what* she wanted to forget.

She asked us not to press her on it because it was private. We accepted for now, since we deemed it possible to find "a way to forget" even without knowing " what to forget".

Nonetheless, I was somewhat interested in whatever it was that could be troublesome to remember.

"That said, this hasn't happened before, so there's nothing we could research. Let's wait and see for a while. "

"I agree... By the way, she was introduced to you by an acquaintance, right?"

"Mm? Yeah."

"What kind of person is that acquaintance?"

"What do you mean by 'what kind'?"

"Nah, I just wondered if it's someone like you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Well, someone who isn't only a sucker for Relics, but oddities of all kinds, and who loves to try them out on others. In other words, an oddball that can't adapt to society...?

"No, don't tell me. If you do, one of my important part-timers might end up dead."

She'd rather reflect on her actions than restrain herself and not ask. That said, I was not so stupid as to voluntarily go in harm's way.

"So what kind of person is it?"

"Oh, just an old friend. A nuisance that gives Relics to people on a whim," Towako-san muttered with an absent gaze.

As the matter had been settled for the time being, I decided to study.

I had a supplementary exam the following day; there was enough pressure to get me into the mood.

If I'd had even just a tenth of my current willingness at school, then I wouldn't have to suffer now...

Well, I knew only too well that this was impossible, though.

"Didn't your exams end today?" Saki asked with an observant look.

"H-Homework."

"You got yourself a supplementary exam, didn't ya?" Towako-san hit the bull's eye.

Well, it was a bad excuse anyway, since I never did homework.

"You're quite the maverick for wanting to take a supplementary exam," Saki remarked in a flat voice.

I would have laughed back at her if that had been sarcasm. But in her case, she apparently didn't know what a supplementary exam was. There we have another oddball who can't adapt to society.

"Even though I helped you so much yesterday...," Towako-san sighed.

*You call **that** help?*

I admit that doing it like a quiz and asking me questions is a perfectly valid way to study, but I have a strong feeling that it was more just me helping her kill time.

"Alrighty, repetition time. Explain the Doppler effect!"

"Uuhm, aah, let me think... that's that swaying of the pitch when an ambulance passed by or when you come by a railroad crossing."

"Not examples, tell me the definition."

"Umm, something about... the source of waves..."

"The formulae?"

"Weell, there were a few..."

That was a problem I hadn't been able to answer after three tries the other day. Of course this had also been in the exam, but it was questionable if I had answered correctly. Since I hadn't been able to answer it in the shop , I had given up on it when I came across it in the exam.

Towako-san let out a deep sigh.

"If your grades drop too much, I won't be able to let you work here."

"They're not high enough to drop."

"Don't act big, you fool," she said and tore off a page from the notebook Relic for some reason. "Here. It

belongs to someone else, so I can't give you the whole thing, but a page should be okay."

She tossed me the torn-off page.

"M-May I really?"

"It'd rub me the wrong way if your grades dropped because of my shop. Note only the things down you can't remember whatever you try."

Suddenly, for the first time, she looked like an angel to me.

Studying had never been so effective in my life.

After all, everything went straight into my head as soon as I had written it down. For the first time in my life , I had fun studying. I was now able to accept the statement that studying was fun if you caught on.

I noted down everything the exam covered, writing as tiny as I could. I couldn't get everything on the page, front and back, but it was enough to avoid falling flat.

To my surprise, Towako-san prepared Tonkatsu[1] for dinner to raise my spirits and make me "win" against the

exam. She was just like a mother to her son who had to take an entrance examination.

It was always Saki who prepared the meals, so I was surprised Towako-san could actually cook. She couldn't wash and clean, but cooking was something different according to her.

"Yum, really tasty!"

"Hehe, looking in a different light at me now?" Towako-san boasted with a smirk. "Okay, we're doing some repetition while eating! Question: What is the Doppler effect?"

"A phenomenon that occurs due to the relative motion of a wave and its source, or a wave and its observer. The formula to calculate the frequency if the source approaches the observer is..."

I smirked like Towako-san, "Hehe," and answered with ease like reciting the one times table. The answer came out so fluently, I could hardly believe this was my mouth.

I was able to answer almost all questions Towako-san asked me—except for the ones that weren't written in the Relic.

I've got it! My preparations are perfect.

It was also the first time that I couldn't wait for my exams.

01:00pm: I went to the Tsukumodo Antique Shop (FAKE) with my notebook—the memento of my mother.

I talked with Towako Settsu, the owner, and her employees, Saki Maino and Tokiya Kurusu.

What I talked about: myself. My name, my address, my phone number and my age. My accident. My defective memory. The notebook.

What I learned about: the notebook. Confirmed that it lets me remember everything I write in it, as my mother said, and it's known as a "Relic". In order to forget, I only have to erase

or cross out the corresponding section. But it's unknown what happens to sections I have eaten.

They are looking for a way to let me forget the memory in question.

I have left the notebook in their care. (*important!*)

On the way home I made my purchases.

What I bought: chicken breast meat, potatoes and onions for dinner. Furthermore: tissues and a packet of toothbrushes.

For dinner I prepared sautéed chicken with a potato salad, an onion soup and French bread.

...Having written my diary to that point, I took a breath.

I called it diary, but as a matter of fact, you could say I traced my memories. After writing all that had happened that day before the memories faded, I copied the text to my computer.

I did so to help me remember these things when I forgot about them in the future.

As for the text I'd written on a memo, I was going to eat it to make my memories hold longer. I usually ate such memos

distributed on my lunch, my dinner and before going to bed. Eating memos to remember things is said to be a superstition, but to me it had already become a habit, because I had been doing it since I was young on the order of my mother.

The notebooks I was using were common ones you can buy in every store and not the Relic she had bequeathed to me. Because it was all stored in my computer as well, I used such notebooks unless it was something I wanted to remember no matter what.

I fetched some water and tore the page off the notebook. I then crumpled it up, making it a little easier to eat. I used to throw up or upset my stomach in the past, but by now I had become used to it.

I soaked the page in water and put it into my mouth. It wasn't a pleasant taste at all, but still I kept chewing to make it squashier.

Previously I had mixed it into my meals, but I couldn't do so anymore as of late.

The chime rang.

I stopped chewing and gulped the page down.

I washed it down with the remaining water and headed to the entrance.

It was Hideki-san who had come home from work.

"Hey."

"Welcome back."

Hideki-san entered and I welcomed him with a smile.

He was my fiancé I was going to marry soon. We had known each other since childhood, and after going separate ways for a while, we met again and started dating each other.

"Aah, I'm starving! Is dinner ready?"

"Yes, it's prepared. I just have to warm it up."

He lived in the house next to mine, and always came for dinner after work. Therefore, I couldn't mix the notes into my meals anymore, but I didn't mind it.

"What's for today?"

"Sauteed chicken with a potato salad, an onion soup and French bread."

Thank goodness, I remembered it.

"Could I have some rice instead of bread?"

"There are leftovers from yesterday, I'll warm them up for you."

I have to add this and eat it before going to sleep.

With these thoughts in mind, I took out a pan to fry the chicken breast.

After dinner, we made ourselves comfortable and watched TV.

When I made us some tea and came back from the kitchen, Hideki-san raised a subject, "On the way here I heard our neighbors talking about a suspicious person lingering in this area."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Make sure you lock the door when you leave, okay?"

Indeed. This was a serious matter for me, as I often forgot to lock up.

"What does he look like?" I asked, since knowing his features was going to help me identify him.

"Umm..."

"Wait a second."

I prepared a pen and a notebook, so I wouldn't forget.

As Hideki-san knew about my accident and the after effects on my memory, he patiently waited for me.

"...They said it's a man about fifty or sixty. He's been walking around in these quarters wearing a jumper and was covering his face with a cap."

"Fifty or sixty...?"

A fearful notion crossed my mind.

I shook that thought off right away. He wasn't supposed to know where I was. It had to be someone else. I told myself to stop having such useless premonitions.

"Does it ring a bell with you? Did you see him or no?"

"Ah, no. I just thought that quite a lot fall under these conditions."

"Well, indeed." He didn't consider suspicious characters or criminals a direct threat. While he took note of the case, apparently he wasn't bothered that much and changed the subject. "Anyways, there's something I wanted to ask you about our wedding ceremony!"

"Ah, yes?"

"Do you even remember the date?"

"O-Of course!"

There was a date that came to mind, but I was too unsure to put it into words. I had no confidence. If I was wrong, he would certainly be offended. My defective memory aside, it would be outrageous to forget such an important thing.

I know... I really do... but...

"Just joking! I mean, you wouldn't forget *that*, now would you?" he laughed without showing any doubt.

I felt a pang of conscience.

"Anyway, a friend of mine is planning on making a slideshow for the wedding reception. You know, that thing where you show old photos. For that I'd like to have a few of you, too. Where do you keep them?"

"They are in a cardboard in the room over there... I think. I'll take a look."

"Ah, there's no hurry. Let's pick some together another time."

"I agree."

"Then about your guests..."

My heart skipped a beat.

"Are you sure you only want to invite your grandparents from your relatives?"

"Yes. I don't really maintain contact with my relatives, you know. I'm sorry. I know, you have invited a lot..."

"I don't mind, but are you sure you don't want to get in touch with your father?"

"...yes. I'm sorry."

"No, don't worry. Sorry for pestering you about it. All right! We have a lot to do!" Hideki-san laughed.

I was seized by unrest, afraid that I might ruin his smile.

The next day.

There were two other students in the classroom, desperately cramming with their books and notes before the supplementary exam started.

Give it your best shot, my friends. Struggle to your heart's content! As you have no choice! Unlike me.

I watched them from behind—just like a certain colonel who once said "Aha, some human garbage!" while looking down on the mob.

"Is everyone here?" asked the teacher as he entered through the door at the rear. "Quite confident today, aren't you?" he said upon noticing that I wasn't struggling to do my last preparations. "You look like you have completed your preparations."

"Something like that, yes."

"Now if only you'd make that be the case at the normal exams as well."

"Let's not go into *that*!"

"Hahaha, very well, then show me what you can," the teacher said, apparently reassured by my self-confidence.

He distributed the exercise sheets to the three of us. I was devoid of fear of what awaited me on the other side of the turned sheets.

He, he, he! No problem, my dear teacher. Lean back and let me show you my skill!

"You have sixty minutes. You can leave when you're done. The test covers the same subjects as the previous one. I even made the problems a little easier. Try to ease your tension a little and you'll be able to use your full power."

You made them easier? Oh, but my dear teacher, there was no need to do that.

Well? Since I'm not alone, I guess you had no other choice.

Allow me to thank you on their behalf.

I shall respond in kind to the goodwill you've shown your students with a good grade.

"Okay, start!"

As soon as I heard the start call, I swiftly flipped around the paper.

Lots of questions leaped to my eye.

Making up my mind, I tightened my grip on the pen and—

".....eh?"

—grew stiff.

"How was the exam?" Towako-san asked right away when I came rushing in.

I ignored her and started searching my study materials I had used the day before.

"Welcome back. How was the..." Saki was eager to know as well.

"It's not there! Nowhere! Hey, where is the torn-off note that I put here?!"

"Note?"

"Yes! Look, there was a paper with the exam questions on it, right?"

"Didn't you bring it to school?"

I hadn't, since there had been no need to.

"It's not there?" she asked.

"I'm asking because it's not!"

I started rummaging through the trash bin. However, I didn't find the note on which I had written the scope of the exam in the minutest details.

"Looks like it ended up as expected, heh," Towako-san chuckled, seeing my fruitless search attempt.

With a queasy feeling, I pressed on her. "What's that supposed to mean? As expected?"

"By 'as expected' I mean that the result I expected became reality!"

"That's not what I want to hear... Towako-san, you know where the note is, don't you?"

Towako-san pointed at me with a broad smile.

"If I had it, I wouldn't be searching, now would I? I didn't take it with me!"

"I know that you didn't. To be exact, you couldn't. Ah no, should I say that you did, in this case?"

"Tell me where it is, already!"

"As I said, right there!"

She pointed at me once more. Specifically, at the center if my body—my stomach.

"Or is it perhaps already over there, to be exact?" she corrected herself and moved her finger toward the restroom.

"N-No way...?"

"But yes. I blended that note into yesterday's Tonkatsu. You loved it, didn't you? Your Relic-flavored cutlet," she

said with a brazen face. "So we learned that digesting a memo has the same effect as erasing the text. That's a step forward!"

So that was why she had prepared dinner the other day.

She dared use me as a laboratory rat...

"Good boys don't abuse a Relic to pass an exam, you know?"

Towako-san laughed teasingly and flicked my forehead.

My face turned ashen.

Ashen white like a corpse.

...Incidentally, I was in for a second supplementary exam.

With the exam slated for the following week, I started looking for a solution to this case.

My teacher probably thought that a day wasn't enough ; he gave me a full week of time to study. I still vividly remembered how he'd smiled with rage—sounds strange , but that's what he was like—when he approached me with my blank answer sheet in his hands. That smile was going to haunt my nightmares. I wouldn't be forgetting that face anytime soon—even without a magical notebook reminding me.

It was then that Towako-san and I made a deal: she promised to give me a page of that notebook if I solved the case.

I was absolutely not going to make the mistake of eating the note this time.

No, don't you tell me to study! I wouldn't go through the hassle of relying on a notebook to begin with if I could score without cheating.

Anyways.

Concerning the reason why Etsuko-san couldn't forget that certain memory:

In my case, I forgot about the text when I ate and digested it. Pretty obvious, now that I thought about it, since the text was erased by stomach acid after all.

She visited just yesterday. It was very unlikely that her memory had yet to have been digested at that point, as she must have eaten it at least prior to the day before yesterday.

So why was she unable to forget nonetheless?

There was only one conceivable answer.

Which is to say, she hadn't eaten that memo.

She claimed to have done so, but her word wasn't of much weight in lieu of her poor memory and her forgetful nature. Perhaps, she had confused it with some other scrap she had eaten, or she had simply put it somewhere and had forgotten to eat it.

If I managed to locate that memo and erase it, she would be able to forget it.

Therefore, I decided to search her house.

Using the address Etsuko-san had told us, Saki and I headed to her house.

The reason for taking Saki with me was that I thought there might be spots a man should not rummage about, since Etsuko-san lived alone.

We passed by a closed elementary school that served us as a point of orientation, and entered the residential area not far from there. It didn't take long until we found the house in question. Etsuko-san was sweeping right before the entrance.

When I greeted her, she bowed her head in reply and said, "Excuse me, but do we know each other?"

"...I'm Tokiya Kurusu."

Etsuko-san took a notepad out of the pocket of her apron and clapped her hands together after she had looked something up. I sneaked a peek and found out that it was some sort of memo of her schedule today.

"Welcome! I've been waiting for you."

But you forgot!

Before I could make that remark, a man left the house next door. He was about in his late twenties and gave Etsuko-san a wave when he saw her. Apparently able to memorize at least the face of her neighbor, she greeted him with a smile.

The man looked at Etsuko-san and then at us. Perhaps we seemed like curious combination to him.

"Who are they?"

Searching for an answer, Etsuko muttered, "Umm..."

She didn't know how to put it.

"We are from the Tsukumodo Antique Shop. We have come to acquire items like antiques or old furniture."

At the perfect moment, Saki started her business talk. This was the pattern we often used in situations where we had to reveal ourselves. After all, we couldn't just give anyone an explanation of what Relics were.

"If you are interested as well, be welcome to get in touch with us."

"No, I do not have anything of interest for you."

While he wasn't suspicious of us, he quickly left and didn't want to have anything to do with us. After seeing that he had gone around the next corner, Etsuko-san let us in.

"Excuse the mess."

This was no empty phrase. There were indeed piles of cardboard boxes in the corridor and so forth. However, it was not like she had neglected cleaning the house.

"I haven't put everything in order yet since I moved here."

Now I got why there were cardboard boxes in the corridor and the living room. At the same time, the probability that she had left the scrap somewhere and forgotten about it grew. Or perhaps she had lost it while she was tidying things away from her move.

"Okay, let's begin, shall we?"

Because we couldn't just tell her, "You haven't eaten the memo but left it somewhere," we told her that she might have another Relic that caused her to remember.

While she owned one, she hadn't known about Relics until she heard it from us, so she believed us quite easily.

Etsuko-san lived alone in a two-storied house. Judging from the stains on the walls and the scars in the posts, the building wasn't new. To be honest, I had no clue why she would move into such a house instead of an apartment.

After we had been led to the living room, we decided on ask a few question for starters.

"That memory is still there, right?"

"Yes."

My faint hope that she might have forgotten by now was blasted in a snap.

"Okay, then could you tell us what's been going on recently? Specifically, have you done anything special during the last week?"

"Special?"

Etsuko-san opened her laptop and looked back at her actions this week.

"You even forget things that only happened a week ago?" I asked.

"Not everything, but parts."

"By the way, what are you always writing in your computer?"

"A diary on a daily basis."

On my request, she let me take a look. There were folders for every year and month, and in there were a bunch of text files for every day.

"In the beginning, I used real diaries, but they grew so much in number that it became bothersome to carry them around. Therefore, I switched to a computer."

Judging from the file size, her diary entries were very long.

"Okay, one week ago I stood up at seven in the morning. Then I had breakfast. I had toast, fried egg and salad. I also drank some black tea..."

"...You don't have to tell us such things."

How detailed did she write her entries? Anyway, that kind of information wasn't much use to us.

"Um, did you go somewhere during this week?" I asked.

Etsuko-san navigated her computer.

"Only when I made my purchases, and perhaps to your shop for some advice."

"...Did you take the notebook Relic with you for your purchases?"

"No. A a basic rule, I don't carry it around. Only my computer and perhaps a notepad."

This eliminates the possibility that she has dropped it somewhere.

"...By the way, when did you move here?"

"Just recently. At the beginning of the month...," she said and took a look at her computer. "Yes. At the beginning of the month."

About two weeks ago... So I guess I should inquire about her move, too...

That moment, Saki posed a question.

"When did you eat the memo anyway?"

Right. I hadn't asked that question. It had slipped my mind because I was confident that she hadn't eaten it. With that information, we knew until when she had the memo, and could investigate on Etsuko-san's actions thereafter.

I was thoughtless—I wasn't in the position to talk badly about Etsuko-san.

"Um... wait a moment, please."

She started looking it up on her computer. She had opened several folders, so the search was taking some time. She had probably no idea where it was.

"By the way, you ate it after moving here, right?"

If she had eaten—or more like, torn off—the note before moving, her previous house would come into question as well. If her memo had ended up in the trash bin but still got off undamaged, then we might already be at our wits' end.

"No, before."

"In your previous house?"

That put a spoke in my wheel. To my surprise, however, Etsuko-san shook her head.

"No. I ate it here!"

"Huh? But didn't you just say you ate it before moving here?"

"Yes."

...She lost me.

"Um, but *when* was that anyway? You needn't look it up. Just roughly. Um, one week... no, one month ago?"

"No," she shook her head.

"Ten years ago."

According to the explanation she gave us, she had lived in this house until ten years ago, and had moved somewhere else, just to return recently.

But she had eaten that note ten years ago. In other words, when she still lived here—which was ten years from now, and with two moves in between. Of course, we had no idea where that scrap of paper was.

We took a look around in the house just to be sure, but naturally our search remained fruitless.

"Should we set the house on fire and erase it for good?"

"Have you lost it?"

I quickly said, "Just joking!" when Saki scolded me. Although I was half-serious.

We had gone into Etsuko-san's room and were still searching for the memo.

It was a completely ordinary room with a desk, a bookshelf and a wardrobe, and a curtain atop the window. There were several post-it notes on the wardrobe that marked what was inside. She had probably developed her own tricks for her daily life. What puzzled me was that there were cardboard boxes here as well.

I asked Saki to search the bookshelf and the desk, whereas I went for the cardboard boxes. I had already gotten permission from Etsuko-san.

I unsealed one of the boxes and took an album out of it .

Since she didn't mind if we looked, I flicked through it.

"Cute."

"We're not here to play around," I complained to Saki who was peeking at the album over my shoulders, but still we continued looking through it.

It started off with photos of a baby, and recorded her gradual growth to a young girl. Around the time she went to elementary school, she started to resemble her current self. And at the time, she had still had her parents at both sides.

There was also a picture of her time at the hospital. She stood there with a bandage wrapped around her head and a flower bouquet in her hands. She was surrounded by a doctor and nurses. It was probably a picture of her discharge, and the only one of that time.

A few pages after, her father disappeared from the photos.

It was a couple of years after the accident. Only her mother remained at her side.

There had been no large span between the divorce and the decease of her mother; after only a few pictures, her parents were replaced by an aged man and woman on the pictures.

I suspected they were Etsuko-san's grandparents who had taken her in. They appeared on the photographs of her graduation from elementary, middle and high school,

as well as her coming-of-age celebration. It seemed like a kind-hearted old couple.

I paged back to the last picture with her parents.

It was about ten years ago, when she was in elementary school.

It had immediately rang a bell with me when she told me that she had used the notebook ten years ago.

Her mother's accidental death, ten years ago.

The memory she had recorded in the Relic, ten years ago.

These two facts could not be unrelated.

The thing she wanted to forget was bound to have something to do with her mother's decease.

I had no idea what exactly she had recorded.

But I strongly doubted it was something pleasant.

There was probably more to it.

Something she couldn't tell anyone.

I had no clue what it was—no I did. But I sealed that thought away, because it was a crazy thought and absolutely not something to say carelessly.

I pushed the box with albums aside and pulled another one to me. It was labeled at the side as "Diaries (1)".

"Do you plan on reading the diaries as well?"

"I'll just skim through them. I'll try my best not to read anything."

I did have permission, but I had no intention of violating her privacy. That said, I was ready to read sections that might contain a clue.

I took out the diaries. They were all of high quality and had a leather binding. Quite extravagant and mature for an elementary schooler to use.

The diaries had their year marked on the cover.

They started fifteen years ago, about the time she was in the first year of elementary school.

"I suppose she started after she had met with an accident," Saki commented.

No wonder the diaries were of high quality and leather-bound!

To her, the memories recorded in those diaries were an irreplaceable treasure.

At least her parents must have thought so when they bought them for her.

I opened one of the diaries and found a clumsy handwriting that didn't match the splendidly made diary . The size of the letters was as irregular as it gets, there were misspellings all over the page, and the grammar had been ignored entirely. It was well-nigh unreadable.

Nevertheless, I was sure she had read through these entries again and again when she wanted to recall old memories.

The pages were worn with frequent use, and there were places that had gotten wet and had dried up, although I didn't know whether the cause was sweat or tears.

As time went by, the entries changed into a proper writing. However, I was taken aback by all the details.

Not only did they contain the events of every day, but also what time she stood up, what she ate, which train she took, what she was doing and thinking during the day, and so forth. Therefore, the number of diaries was quite overwhelming.

Probably this also served as some sort of rehabilitation. It was hard to guess how much time she had spent every day to write those diaries.

I took another diary.

One that was written just ten years ago. The period of time she had used the Relic.

With a sting of remorse, I opened the diary.

Among other things, it contained the entry of the day of her mother's decease.

As always, it started with the time she woke up and what she had for breakfast, and contained a detailed report of her experiences at school.

However, it mentioned that she was scolded by her mother for neglecting her diary for once. Apparently, she had played together with her friends instead of going straight home.

There was a touch of irony in the fact that her mother fell from the stairs on that day of all days. Moreover, it happened when Etsuko-san was in the midst of writing her diary. The entry of that day stopped there.

I flipped the page. In the next entry she wrote about the decease of her mother at the hospital and the wake that was going to be held.

Even after that, she had continued writing her diary without skipping a day.

However, I didn't find anything she may have wanted to hide.

Well, if there was, she wouldn't have allowed me to freely look through them.

The entry that day that was broken off unfinished... how was it supposed to end?

...Or was the continuation written in the Relic?

"Why don't you take a break?" Etsuko-san startled me, standing beside me all of a sudden.

Even though I had permission, I couldn't help feeling a little awkward when I closed the diary.

"Y-You have a stunning collection of diaries there!"

"Yes. It has become so many because I kept writing them," she answered without any concerns. "So, how about it?"

"Eh? ...Ah, the break? Yes."

We accepted her proposal and put the diaries back into their cardboard box.

While at it, I was seized by misgivings.

Is it okay for us to help her erase that memory?

We didn't know what she wanted to forget.

But it couldn't be anything good.

But no matter how much she wanted to forget, what if it was a memory that was meant to be remembered?

"Um, may I ask you a question?"

"Yes?"

"...Why do you want to forget about *it*?"

After a moment's silence, she answered with a sad face
,

"Because I want to start a new life."

While drinking a cup of coffee, we were taking a break in the living room.

As we had already been searching for a few hours, I had gotten a stiff neck. However, my doubts were fruitless. We didn't even find any hints.

The odds were against us finding a ten years old scrap of paper.

But still, why did Etsuko-san get the wish to forget that memory now of all times?

What was the reason that a memory she had left untouched for ten years became unnecessary?

"May I ask a question?" Saki, who had been silent so far, said.

"Yes, go ahead."

"What's the relationship between you and the man we saw earlier?"

Against all my expectations, she asked something entirely unrelated.

I already prepared myself to make a remark, when suddenly Etsuko-san turned as red as a beet and cast her eyes down.

"To tell the truth, we're marrying next month."

Saki had probably guessed their relationship right away. I had not. What a sharp-eyed girl.

"Congratulations," Saki said bluntly as if she didn't know the meaning of Etsuko-san's words, but Etsuko-san gave her thanks without taking offense. "How did you get to know him?"

"He's a childhood friend, or perhaps, he was something like the boy next door? We lost contact entirely when I moved away, but he happened to frequent the shop I worked at, you know..."

I listened to her without going into the question whether she was really able to work.

"But at first, I didn't realize who he is, and because I used my father's surname when I still lived here, he didn't realize who I am, either. It stayed that way until I visited his parents to introduce myself. That was quite the surprise."

"A fateful encounter."

"Yes, indeed."

Etsuko-san was smiling, but a shadow or some sort of hesitation loomed in her expression.

"Is there a problem?" I asked thoughtlessly, suspecting she had marriage blues.

However, this time she tensed up visibly.

I regretted my own stupidity.

Hadn't I thought about it just moments ago?!

About the reason why a memory she had left untouched for ten years became unnecessary!

If she had to forget it *now*, there was only one reason.

The memory she wanted to forget was an obstacle to her wedding—to her happiness.

Hence, she wanted to forget it before her marriage.

Suddenly, the telephone rang, breaking the heavy silence.

Etsuko-san stood up after asking to be excused, and went to the telephone. She accepted the call after she had picked up the pen that was placed next to the phone with a notepad. She had probably formed a habit of recording her calls.

"Yes, Uwajima speaki... father..."

My full attention was directed at Etsuko-san, who was speaking and holding her breath in turn.

If my memory served me right, she did no longer keep in contact with her divorced father. I didn't want to be rude, but I couldn't help perking up my ears.

"...How did you find out? Grandpa? I see..."

Apparently, she hadn't informed her father that she moved back here. Her grandfather had gotten in touch with him when the wedding became official.

They kept talking for a while.

The reunion of father and daughter was everything but touching. Etsuko-san didn't wish to see him again. She was rejecting any contact with him.

"...Do you remember what I said at mother's funeral? Please forget it. I will do so, too. And please keep away from me," she said one-sidedly and hung up and let out a sigh.

Her face was full of distress. However, recalling our presence, she quickly slapped on a smile.

"Did you keep in contact with your father?"

"No. This was the first time since the funeral of my mother. ...Despite everything, I recognized him by his voice. You remember such things forever, don't you?"

Etsuko-san seemed to be surprised about the fact that she had recognized her father by phone.

It had been about ten years. I felt that this was the bond between parent and child, and completely unrelated to memory and such.

"What kind of father was he?"

"He's not a bad person. He would just often get into an argument with my mother about my upbringing. He was against keeping such a diary. He wanted to bring me up like a normal child. My mother often said he was too concerned about the eyes of the neighborhood. I think so as well."

Indeed, keeping such a detailed diary was a little abnormal from a normal perspective. But as there was an accident, this couldn't be helped. But her father had apparently been unable to think so.

"Do you have a grudge against him?"

"That's not the problem. It's something entirely different. I neither hate him, nor do I bear a grudge against him. I just don't want to have anything to do with someone my mother has severed all contact with... since otherwise it's like I were betraying her. And I don't want to betray her any more."

Does keeping in touch with her father whom her mother has broken contact with equal betraying her? Or was there another reason to it?

Either way, judging from the way she talked, she wasn't down on her father or anything, but merely kept away because of her mother.

But still, I couldn't help being surprised that she remembered that sort of thing rather well.

"Oh, did I dampen the mood...? Ah, right. Please wait a moment."

Etsuko-san forcefully put on a bright face and went into another room. She returned carrying a snow-white wedding dress.

I'm not versed in wedding dresses, but the design looked somewhat old.

"My father chose this dress for my mother. Hideki-san offered to buy me a new one or rent one, but I insisted on wearing this. I want to show at least a little filial piety."

Etsuko-san held the dress in front of her.

She would have looked great in it.

"Come here, Maino-san."

Beckoned over by Etsuko-san, Saki walked hesitantly to her.

Etsuko-san turned Saki around and held the dress in front of her.

"Do you like it, Kurusu-san?" With a mischievous smile, she asked for my impressions.

Don't abuse me to brighten the mood... I can't say that I like it, now can I?

"Fine feathers make fine birds."

"I knew you'd say that."

"What? Did you want me to praise you?"

"No, not in the least."

"Don't get angry!"

"I'm not angry."

"But you are!"

"Whatever."

I heard Etsuko-san whisper into her ear, "He's just shy, " when Saki turned away from me.

Please say such things hidden from me.

Saki's fashion show continued for a while until Etsuko-san was satisfied, and then she went back to the other room to stow away the dress.

Saki looked at me with an inquiring look. No, she wasn't asking for my impressions.

"I know!"

Etsuko-san had been behaving a little strange since the call from her father. The scene she had made just now had been obviously forced. Probably it was just sympathy I had, but I hoped her marriage would bring her happiness, because of the worries about her parents and her accident and its after effects were tormenting her .

I wanted to let her forget "that memory", no matter what. Saki was probably of the same mind.

Suddenly, I noticed something moving outside the window. I opened the curtain and took a look out of the window. Someone was peeking into the house from behind the wall. He quickly ducked, but it was already too late for him.

"Who are you!"

"Tokiya?"

I rushed out without even answering her.

I quickly looked in the direction the man escaped. He was just going around the corner. I hurried after him.

When I came around the same corner, I spotted him from behind.

He wasn't so far away. Without wanting to brag, I'm in good form. As I sped after him, he ran round another corner.

As we were in a residential area, there were lots of branches, but there were almost no people on the streets, so I wasn't going to lose him.

He kept fleeing desperately. But I was faster. The distance between us gradually shrunk. I reached out. Just a little more. The man turned around to take a look behind—that moment his speed dropped slightly. My hand touched him.

I took a leap at him.

With full vigor, the both of us rolled on the ground.

However, my hand didn't let go of him.

"Got you!"

I grabbed the prone man and turned him face-up.

"You...?"

I knew his face.

When I returned to my room to put away my wedding dress, the boxed-in diaries and an opened album caught my eye.

They were things that meant much more to me than the wedding dress.

The precious diaries mother had bought for me.

The precious picture of me and my mother.

Out of worry about me and my defective memory, she had bought countless diaries for me. She had taken countless photographs of me for the album. Not only on our vacation, but also when there was an event at school or even on normal days.

Thanks to her, I was able to keep a lot of my recollections.

If it hadn't been for my mother, and if I hadn't continued doing as she had told me, I would have been empty like a blank sheet by now.

But I was going to betray her.

I was going to betray my mother who had wished for my happiness more than anyone else.

"Forgive me... Mom..."

I embraced the diary. I couldn't suppress my tears.

"Forgive me... Mom, but I will throw that memory away and become happy."

Even now I still hesitated to erase that memory.

But a word from my mother had brought me to that decision .

"I don't need anything if you attain happiness!"

These were words she had left behind for me the day before she passed away.

She hadn't foreseen her death, but these words became something like her last will by chance.

And her will lived on in my heart.

Therefore, I was going to betray her.

I was able to protect her last will, even if I betrayed her.

"You have wished for my happiness more than anyone else, so you'll understand, right?"

Therefore, I—

"I'll attain happiness. So please forgive me."

Suddenly, the bell rang.

I put away the diary and headed toward the entrance after wiping off my tears.

Kurusu-san and Maino-san weren't in the living room.

Although perplexed, I still went to the door and looked through the peephole. I held my breath.

"Father..."

"Hideki-san...?"

"Could you get off me for starters?" he said, smiling wryly. Apparently he wasn't going to flee anymore.

For the time being, I decided to listen to him and got off him.

Hideki-san stood up as he brushed off the stains from his suit. I followed suit.

"Oh boy, I used to be a marathon runner when I was young, but looks like I get too little exercise."

"You peeked into the house just now, right?" I asked to be sure, but he admitted it right away. "Why did you do that?"

"I was worried! Look, you know Etsuko-san. After hearing that story about buying off antiques, I suspected that you meant to deceive her. Since I couldn't shake of my worries, I came back to take a look. But watching you guys would have been like saying 'I don't trust you', so I watched from outside."

Understanding what he wanted to say, I nodded.

From his perspective, it was only natural to be worried about her. All the more because he knew her well.

"May I ask?"

"What?"

"What did you come for? I've never heard of any antiques in her belongings."

"As there seems to be a misunderstanding, let me tell you that the articles our shop handles are a little different from the antiques you know. Excuse the lacking explanation, but let's just say they're *special*."

Relics are not commonly known. If I had told him we handled tools with a special power, he would have grown even more suspicious of us.

Maybe next time we should pose as employees from a second-hand shop who came for household utensils and electric appliances.

"In other words, in her house there is something of value for our shop. It's something she has inherited from her mother, and..."

"Tokiya," Saki called as she rushed to me with a wild breath.

Apparently, she had followed me.

"Thank goodness. I was about to get lost."

"Then why didn't you just stay there?"

"I had no idea what was going on when you rushed out all of a sudden! ...Hideki-san? Hideki-san was that suspicious character?"

"Suspicious character? Now don't exaggerate. Hideki-san was only watching what we were doing."

"Really? On my way here I heard people talk about a suspicious character that has been lingering about again, so I was sure it was him."

"Aah, about that. Recently there have been reports of a suspicious character in these quarters. I haven't seen him myself, but according to our neighbors, he has been peeping at her house. But it's not me! He's said to be about fifty."

A suspicious character peeping at Etsuko-san's house who's about fifty years old?

She hadn't mentioned anything about such a person. We had no one in mind.

No, wait. A man who's about fifty? I have never met him, but there is a suspect.

If we consider how old Etsuko-san is, he should be about that age.

"He's appeared recently?"

"Well, yeah."

It had also been recently that her grandparents had gotten in touch with him. As it was the house he had lived in the past, it would be no surprise if he knew the address.

Come to think of it, there was a phone call not long ago. What if that was to check if she was at home...?

"That man might be Etsuko-san's father."

"No, her father divorced and isn't around anymore. They haven't met in over ten years."

"Eh? Why do you..."

I was going to ask why he knew, but of course he did. Hideki-san was her childhood friend and most likely knew her father in person.

I noticed another thing.

It was not only Etsuko-san and her father who knew about what happened ten years ago. Hideki-san might know as well.

But as a mere employee at an antique shop, I was not in the position to ask him about it.

To begin with, there was no time anyway.

"Saki, we're going back! Hideki-san, you too!"

Leaving behind only these words, I ran back to Etsuko-san's house without waiting for an answer.

Perhaps it was a crazy thought.

Perhaps it was absurd.

But it was something I had been thinking the whole time. Ever since I realized that there was a connection between the ten-years old memory she wanted to forget and her mother's decease.

If it was only an accident, there was no secret to hide.

If it was only an accident, there was no secret to forget.

This is a hypothesis.

But if Etsuko-san and Hideki-san's reunion had triggered something—

If they shared a secret and their marriage was a thorn in her father's flesh, it would make sense if his action was triggered now.

But what was he going to do after such a long time? That was the question.

I opened the door and rushed into her house.

"Etsuko-san!" I yelled, but there was no reply.

I rushed through the corridor and jumped into the living room.

Etsuko-san was nowhere to be seen. But in her room, I found a man.

A man, who was about fifty and had partly white hair, turned to me, surprised. In his hands, an album and a diary.

"W-Who are you?"

"You're Etsuko-san's father, aren't you?"

"Y-Yes...?"

"Where is she?"

Even though I talked in a strong voice, she didn't appear.

"What have you done to her?!"

"Calm down," said Saki, who had come in a few moments later, as she clung to me from behind and held me back from attacking the old man. "Her shoes aren't here. Where did she go?"

"Aah, she was called out by phone and just left. She asked me to look after the house."

"Look after the house?"

I felt how my boiling blood cooled down after hearing that surprising answer.

"This is also his house, so why should he not be here?" Saki said.

"W-Well..."

However, after hearing that, Etsuko-san's father straightened himself and said with a bitter smile,

"This isn't my house anymore! I have abandoned this place. I don't even have the right to call myself her father anymore. As you said, I shouldn't be here," he declared and stood up. "You two, are you her friends?"

"Ah, yeah. Kind of," I nodded vaguely as I didn't know how to reply.

"Can I leave the house in your care, then? I think I'll take my leave."

"Eh? Don't you want to wait for her return?"

"I actually came to give her the money I had set aside for her marriage, but she won't accept it. I'm going to hand it over to my father-in-law instead... Please convey my greetings to her. And also tell her that I won't bother her anymore."

"W-Wait a moment, please! Saki, go fetch Etsuko-san."

I was unsure if I could just let him go, so I wanted Saki to bring Etsuko-san, but her father said,

"She's meeting Hideki-kun right now, so please don't disturb them."

"Huh?"

What did he just say? —Hideki-san?

"There was a call from him just now. Or do you not know Hideki-kun? He's her husband-to-be!"

"We know. But Hideki-san has been together with us until just now."

Come to think of it, he hadn't come back here with us.

"When did you get the call?"

"Just now. A few moments before you arrived here. It seemed like an urgent matter."

What's that supposed to mean... almost as if to make us miss her...

I started to feel strong qualms.

Had I gotten something completely the wrong way?

A thought crossed my mind. A thought I had had earlier.

It's not only Etsuko-san and her father who know about what happened ten years ago. Hideki-san might know as well.

Why did I miss the possibility that was a step ahead from there?

The possibility that Hideki-san, her childhood friend, was involved in the incident.

"I'm sorry, but please tell us if you know what happened ten years ago."

Her father's grew visibly pale.

"Right. Her mother passed away. What happened at the time?" I added.

"...My wife slipped and fell from the stairs. Unfortunately, she..."

"That's all? What about Etsuko-san at the time?"

"Apparently, she was locked in her room in the second floor because she had misbehaved."

"That's all? Didn't she say anything more?"

"....."

"Please tell us! It's important!"

After a short silence, he muttered, "....All right."

"She said that Hideki-kun had pushed her mother down."

I was left speechless.

"I only met her once at the funeral. She told me then. But at the time, he was still in elementary school, so he would have never done that. I suspect she made this up because she didn't want to blame herself, because she believed this wouldn't have happened if she hadn't misbehaved."

Finally I realized what the ten-years old memory she wanted to forget was.

Etsuko-san witnessed ten years ago how Hideki-san killed her mother. But her father didn't believe her. No one believed her.

Because she didn't trust her own memory, she wrote the truth down in the Relic and ate it to make sure she wouldn't forget. I don't know why she ate it. Either to make herself remember, or to hide it.

However, she met Hideki-san again.

She met him again without knowing who he was—and fell in love.

Therefore, she wanted to forget the truth about her mother's death. She wanted to forget that the man she loved had killed her mother.

"Tell me one more thing," I asked. "Has her brain *really* been damaged and caused her memory to be defective?"

Her father widened his eyes.

That was enough for me.

"Her memory is operating properly, right?"

While talking to Etsuko-san, I entertained doubts several times. When we asked her about her past, she would always consult her computer. But there were never any contradictions to what she had said before.

While she was forgetful and a scatterbrain, her long-term memory seemed just fine. Everything she had forgotten was quite normal.

I don't remember how long my record of forgetting things in elementary school was, either. I don't remember what I ate a week ago. But she considered forgetting such things *strange*.

She had no confidence in her memory... no, she was obsessed with thinking so.

"...It's like you said. Her memory is operating perfectly fine! She has only suffered from a loss of memory, but her memory itself remained undamaged. Sure, she's very forgetful and has trouble remembering faces, but there's no big difference from others. The doctor also confirmed that there was no problem to her brain."

"Then why is it that she thinks so about herself...?"

"My wife is the origin. When Etsuko forgot something, she would persuade herself that the accident was to blame and forced Etsuko to memorize lots of useless things. She bought diaries for her and made her write her diary every day. In extreme detail, Etsuko had to write what she had thought and what she had done, and even pointless things like what she had eaten. If she didn't write the diary, my wife would beat her and lock her up in her room until she completed the entry. Naked, at that. I often got into an argument with my wife because of that . This was also the cause for our divorce. When I rebuked her and told her that she was going to far, she yelled at me that I was not thinking about Etsuko. But I could understand why she became like that."

"Was there a reason?"

"Etsuko's accident. But not the accident itself... after meeting with the accident, she was unconscious for a week. When she finally woke up and looked at her mother, her first words were:

—'Who are you?'

Most likely her memories were only a little mixed up. She recognized her shortly after. But this didn't deaden

the shock my wife had gotten. From the fact that Etsuko had lost memories of her past, she arrived at the idea that Etsuko's memory had gotten defective. Therefore, she tried to make her remember more than necessary. Because of that, Etsuko also started to believe that her memory were defective. No matter how much I told her otherwise, she just wouldn't believe me."

Etsuko-san had told us that she could not forget what had happened ten years ago. No wonder. Who would forget the death of one's mother after only ten years? It's a matter of course that one can't forget it for a lifetime. It's a matter of course to remember.

The information of her defective memory had misled me.

It was a completely normal thing.

"I'm sorry, but did she say where she went?"

"Mm, she left in a hurry, you know. But I think she wrote a memo...?"

I went to the phone.

Next to the phone was a notepad and a pen. A rather thick notepad. She had most likely the habit of taking notes, since she had no confidence in her memory. It may go without saying, but the memo where she had noted the meeting point had been torn off.

But it was still there. The meeting place was still written there.

I took the pen and moved it over the new memo. While paying attention not to press to hard, I painted the memo black. Fine white lines became visible on the black surface. The pressure of her pen stroke had left an impression on the underlying sheet.

"....."

But all the impressions that had been made over time overlapped and made it impossible to read it.

Because several letters overlapped each other, it looked only like a pattern that couldn't be read at all or that could be read as anything.

I sharpened my eyes and looked again at the memo. However, the more I tried, the more I failed to make sense of it.

"Tokiya..."

Saki's uneasy voice stroked my back.

It was then that a painful noise crossed my mind—

Etsuko-san and Hideki-san were facing each other.

I don't know where this is.

Etsuko-san was standing with her back to a fence, and Hideki-san was standing in front of her.

I was watching this scene from afar. To be more exact, it was like looking down from a higher building at the roof of a lower building.

Etsuko-san was shaking her head.

I couldn't make out her expression. I could only see her back. Most likely she was appealing to him, but I couldn't understand what she said.

Hideki-san slowly approached her.

She took a step back but had to stop because she bumped against the fence.

Behind the fence was nothing.

My field of vision moved downward.

Below the fence was a wall with windows. There were a lot of window glasses that were neatly arranged in a regular interval. An apartment house? No. There was a round clock on the wall.

My field of vision moved back up.

At the same time, Etsuko-san bent back and was pushed over the fence.

"——!"

"Tokiya!"

Saki's strong voice brought me back.

The future my artificial right eye—a Relic named " Vision"—had shown me, was the worst that could happen.

"What's wrong?"

"If we don't do something, Etsuko-san is going to be..."

I was about to say *killed*, but I held myself back. I couldn't say this in front of her father. But Saki had apparently guessed.

"Where is she?" she asked.

"At school."

A fenced roof, regularly arranged windows, a clock on the wall.

The only building that incorporated all of these elements was a school.

"They are at school."

I looked again at the memo. The unreadable letters. Within them I could recognize something.

—"Closed School".

"It's that closed school."

The place "Vision" had shown to me was no doubt a roof of a school.

Etsuko-san was going to be pushed off the roof by Hideki-san.

I looked at the clock. The time was 18:45. The time I had read off the clock at the school was a few minutes before 19:00.

We could still make it in time. But we didn't have much. We had to hurry.

"Quick, Saki!"

I rushed out of the house and ran toward the closed school.

I jumped over the chained metal school gate and entered the school area.

Saki was probably unable to keep up with me and still underway. But I couldn't wait for her.

This school consisted of two buildings with a courtyard in between. The buildings were marked as " Building A" and "Building B". Nearly all window glasses were already broken and the courtyard was covered by a cloud of dust, indicating the age of the school. The doors had been broken off, too, destroyed by someone thoughtless. This made it easy to advance into the buildings.

According to "Vision", they were on the roof.

The question was on which.

I compared the two buildings.

However, both of them looked the same, making it hard to determine which one "Vision" had shown to me.

They were only connected at the first floor, so I would have to go all the way down to the first floor if I picked the wrong one.

The building "Vision" had shown to me had a fence, windows and a clock.

But those existed on both buildings.

Which one is it?

I compared the two school buildings like one of those " Spot The Difference" games.

But I didn't find out which it was.

I turned around to the school gate. There was no sign of Saki.

"What's that slowpoke doing!"

If she had been here, we could have split into groups... !

A look at the clock revealed to me that it was soon 19: 00.

The time limit was almost over. No time to wait for Saki.

Which one do I pick?

I'll have to go by instinct.

The moment I thought so, I noticed.

There was one difference.

Their height.

Both had three floors, but either because of a miscalculation or because of the ground, the Building A was somewhat taller.

Without a moment's hesitation, I selected the lower building—Building B—and entered it.

There was no guarantee that it really was Building B.

My only reason was that in my vision, I had looked down from a higher building at a lower building. However, the only function "Vision" has is to show me someone's death. The perspective does not matter in any way. In other words, it was not sure if I had looked down from Building A at Building B.

However, right now I had nothing else to rely on.

I rushed up to the roof at a breath and opened the metal door.

My prediction proved true.

But I was fatally out of luck.

No, I mustn't blame my luck for it.

If anything, I had to blame it on my slow-wittedness or my indecision.

By the time I arrived at the roof, Etsuko-san was nowhere to be seen anymore.

The only thing I saw was Hideki-san's back and a figure that was disappearing beyond the fence.

Hideki-san turned around.

His eyes were bloodshot and his breath was wild. In contrast to his absurdly heavily shivering lips, his eyes were widened so much he couldn't even wink anymore.

He only required a few seconds to regain his composure after recognizing me.

By just that, he regained his composure.

Even though he had pushed down his wife-to-be, he regained his damn composure in a mere few seconds.

"Why are you here?"

"To stop you from killing her...!"

Hideki-san widened his eyes even more. Had he thought I hadn't seen him?

"T-That's..."

"Don't even try to tell me it was an accident," I declared.

He swallowed the word he was about to say.

"Tell me, why?"

"...To protect myself."

He realized that he couldn't talk himself out anymore, and admitted that he had pushed her down. But I couldn't make sense of his reason.

"To protect yourself?"

"Yes. She's given you the gist of it, hasn't she?"

"...About what happened ten years ago?"

Hideki-san nodded silently.

"So you *did* kill her mother?"

He contorted his face because I had apparently opened an old wound.

"That was an accident. Just because Etsuko played with me before going home, she was beaten and locked in by that hag. I didn't know what she was so angry about. Etsuko was crying. Crying to let her out. Therefore , I tried to help her. When I did so, I got in a quarrel with her mother, and eventually she lost balance and... I was still a child and desperate to help Etsuko... It wasn't on purpose..."

To Etsuko-san's mother, keeping the diary was more important than playing. She wanted her daughter to write her diary even if it meant to lock her in. But to Hideki-san, this was of no importance. He only wanted to help his crying friend.

But that didn't matter right now. Those regrets were completely insignificant.

For they didn't explain anything.

"That doesn't make a reason to kill her!"

"Even if she approached me to take revenge?"

His contorted face became even more twisted. A laugh resounded. But a bitter laugh.

"It's a ridiculous story! Because she had changed her surname, I started going out with her without even realizing that she was Etsuko. I didn't realize until I visited my parents to introduce her as my fiancee.

My heart sank to my boots when she said that she had once lived here, while pointing at the house next to ours..

. After that, she bothered to move back into her previous house. It was then that I realized that she had approached me, making it look like coincidence!"

"She showed no sign of such an intention."

"But she did when she was alone with me. Every day. As if there was no need to hide it anymore, because I had noticed. She *provocatively* wrote those detailed diaries, saying that it was to remember that day's events. To tell me indirectly that she hadn't forgotten what I had done! But every time I unobtrusively asked her about her past, she feigned ignorance. On purpose. To make a fool of me !

...I experienced firsthand what 'applying the screws by degrees' means! I couldn't sleep in the same room like her anymore. I couldn't sleep because I was so afraid of what she might do to me. The decisive factor was that she got in touch with her father after ten years. I tried to convince myself that she did so for our wedding ceremony. But she kept denying it. Even though I asked her about it several times. I was sure they had a scheme. Every time I heard the rumor of a suspicious guy

peeking at her house, I thought he was really observing my house. I lived in fear that he might break in, and didn't sleep a wink. I was at my limit."

"Therefore, you called her out to this roof and wanted to make things clear?"

"Yes."

"She denied it, didn't she?"

"Oh, she did. But..."

"Of course she did. Because she never had such intentions to begin with."

"You don't know anything!"

"But I do. After all, she asked us to erase her memories from ten years ago."

"?"

Hideki-san pulled a baffled face, as if he was unable to understand me.

"She tried to forget. Because she loved you from heart, she tried to forget what happened ten years ago. But she couldn't, so she asked us for help."

"....."

"It seems like you think that she got in touch with her father behind your back, but it was her grandfather who got in touch with him. She didn't tell you because she didn't know for real. Today was the first time they talked with each other."

"Lies..."

"I learned from no one else but her *father* that she had said that you killed her mother ten years ago. She didn't tell us a word about it. No, she even tried to eliminate that truth by erasing her memory of it."

"Lies...," Hideki-san whispered aghast.

"Tell me... you're lying..."

I don't know if he searched for someone to ask or if he wanted to check if the one he was supposed to ask still lived, but he leaned over the fence and looked down.

That moment, the old fence started to bend over.

Unstoppable, but almost like in slow-motion, the fence broke and Hideki-san disappeared from the roof.

Nearly a week had passed since that day.

I was studying hard at the shop because the second supplementary exam was on the following day.

I decided against using the notebook Relic. In the end, the notebook stayed in our care, but when thinking about the emotions Etsuko-san's mother had given it to her daughter with, I couldn't use it carelessly.

Forgetting is a gift given to man.

But how do we forget things?

I believe that is because we stop thinking about them.

However bitter a memory is, it gradually fades away with time. Because we stop thinking about that " something" in our cruelly unstoppable daily lives, the memory fades away.

Until we forget it one day.

But on the other hand, as long as we keep thinking about it, we will absolutely not forget it. The memory won't even fade.

The death of her dear mother. The big mistake of her loved one. No way she would just stop thinking about it.

She must have recalled it every time she opened her diary—the diaries she had received from her mother.

Despite everything, her memories had surely faded a little.

Those ten years had surely made her bitter memories fade a little.

But she met Hideki-san again.

From the day she realized who he was, she started thinking about it again. She recalled that day over and over.

She wanted to forget those memories because she loved him. But the more she wanted to do so, the more she recalled.

Her strong wish to forget had, quite the reverse, fortified her memories over and over and turned it into a firm and clear memory. What an irony.

"But why did Etsuko-san move to the house next to Hideki-san's?" I wondered.

"Probably she wanted to be together with her mother. In the house full of memories, even just for the little while until her wedding. I think this was Etsuko-san's subtle way of atoning for her sin," Saki said as she put a cup of black tea in front of me.

The sweet fragrance of black tea tickled my nose. By the way, Towako-san was pulling a grimace while looking at our sales figures.

It was the same sight as always. Will there be a day I forget this sight?

Suddenly, the door opened and the attached bell announced the arrival of a customer.

Saki went to welcome the customer.

It was Etsuko-san.

By a miracle, she had come off with just a light blow because she had bounced against an awning and then fell on a mat that had been left there by chance. As regards Hideki-san, he unfortunately hadn't had as much luck and missed the mat. Even worse, he had fallen right on the fence that had stuck into the ground and—

"Thank you very much for your help. And forgive me for the belated thanks."

She had undergone investigation.

As we had been involved as well, we received notification from the Police that this case was set aside as an accident in the end.

The Police don't know that Hideki-san tried to kill her. Just like they don't know that he had killed Etsuko-san's mother.

"Did you come for this?" Towako-san asked as she held the notebook aloft.

Etsuko-san shook her head. "You can keep it."

"Are you sure? Didn't we agree that I'd just take a few pages?"

"It's okay. I have enough mementos of my mother, and I don't need it anymore."

"Oh?" I noticed that she didn't have her computer with her.

She looked at me and nodded.

"I don't carry it around any longer. I finally managed to believe my father. My brain has taken no damage and my memory is not defective."

Perhaps it was this kind of confidence she had needed the whole time.

Not a bunch of diaries, and certainly not a notebook that let her remember anything.

"It's really curious. So far I used to believe my memory was cloudy, but now it seems awfully clear to me."

A tear rolled down her cheek.

She looked very, very sorrowful.

"Etsuko-san?"

"Truly, it's all so clear. Be it my mother's death or Hideki-san's attempt to kill me, I remember it all so clearly.

—It's all so *unbearably* clear. So..."

Etsuko-san continued.

"Is there a notebook that makes me forget everything I write in it?"

1. ↑ A fried pork cutlet. It is often prepared before important exams and the likes—because "katsu" also means "to win"

Chapter 4 - Present

My pay is calculated on an hourly basis and given to me every day—in cash.

That's because Towako-san can't be bothered—and would forget—to make a payment to my account at the end of each month.

On days when she's away making purchases, Saki is in charge of paying me.

Since I live in an apartment on my own, I have to spend my pay carefully. My parents do send me money, but my wages still cover a significant part of my daily expenses.

I don't line up for discount sales, but at the very least, I try my best not to waste any money. I even save a little.

I can't say whether or not it's really okay for a high school boy to act so much like a housewife...

Anyway, because of that, I'm not so stupid as to use up my day's pay the day I get it like other students who have gotten a part-time job out of greed.

Living for the moment doesn't suit me.

Always use your money wisely. That's my motto.

"Here, this is a present."

I hardly believed my ears when Tokiya said it out of the blue.

I, Saki Maino, stood stone-still for twenty-two seconds holding a shopping bag in my hands.

Tokiya said something during that time, but because my mind had gone blank, everything went in one ear and out the other.

"...So, got it?"

"Eh? Ah, yes. Sure."

I nodded instinctively, although I had no idea what he had been talking about.

"Anyway, that's all there is to it, okay?" he said and left , perhaps embarrassed.

Left alone, I was at a loss of what to do with the present which—by his words—he had given me and kept standing in one spot.

People—namely Tokiya—often say that I have no feelings, but that's not true. I have some trouble showing them, but naturally I do have feelings, and my heart is as sensitive as anyone else's.

To the extent that I get a little flustered when I receive an unexpected present.

I need to remember what just happened.

Tokiya and I were working together until closing time like we always do.

Towako-san was away to acquire Relics again, and there were next to no customers as usual, so there was pretty much nothing to do.

We really don't get many customers.

I'm convinced that we ought to brighten both the interior and exterior to make it more appealing to customers. I also think it would be best if we included

Asian merchandise and luxury items in our range of goods instead of sticking to forgeries of Relics.

When I suggested this to Towako-san, she told me there was no need for it. Apparently, she didn't have any plans to make her shop flourish, despite her concern over its sales figures.

Maybe I should lend her the copy of "Becoming a Famous Shop Manager made easy!" that I finished reading yesterday?

Oh no. My thoughts have wandered off track.

Anyway, we worked until closing time and then Tokiya left.

But then he came back, for some reason.

At first, I thought he had forgotten something, but then he suddenly handed a shopping bag over to me and told me it was a present.

A present? Why would he give me a present?

I also wondered if today was my birthday, but it isn't.

Labor Thanksgivng Day[1]? Not really. To begin with, there's nothing he should be thankful about.

Mother's Day? I'm not his mother. Father's Day... goes without saying.

Today isn't a special occasion, nor is it a holiday.

Another possibility would be that it's an apology for something he did.

I tried searching my memories, but nothing came to mind that would require an apology.

H-He cheated on me...?

No, we don't have that kind of relationship, so infidelity doesn't apply here.

.....I came to my senses again and felt a little ashamed of having such dull thoughts.

With bag in hand, I went back into the house.

Towako-san is absent so I am alone today.

I put the bag on the table in the living room.

I turned on the TV.

A not particularly interesting variety show was on. The TV failed to draw my attention, so my gaze went back

and forth between the TV and the shopping bag on the table.

I gently touched the bag.

It gave off a rustling sound.

I jerked away my hand.

Then I went back to the TV and changed the channel.

A baseball match was on, but I don't know the rules of the game. The TV failed to draw my attention, so my gaze went back and forth between the TV and the shopping bag on the table.

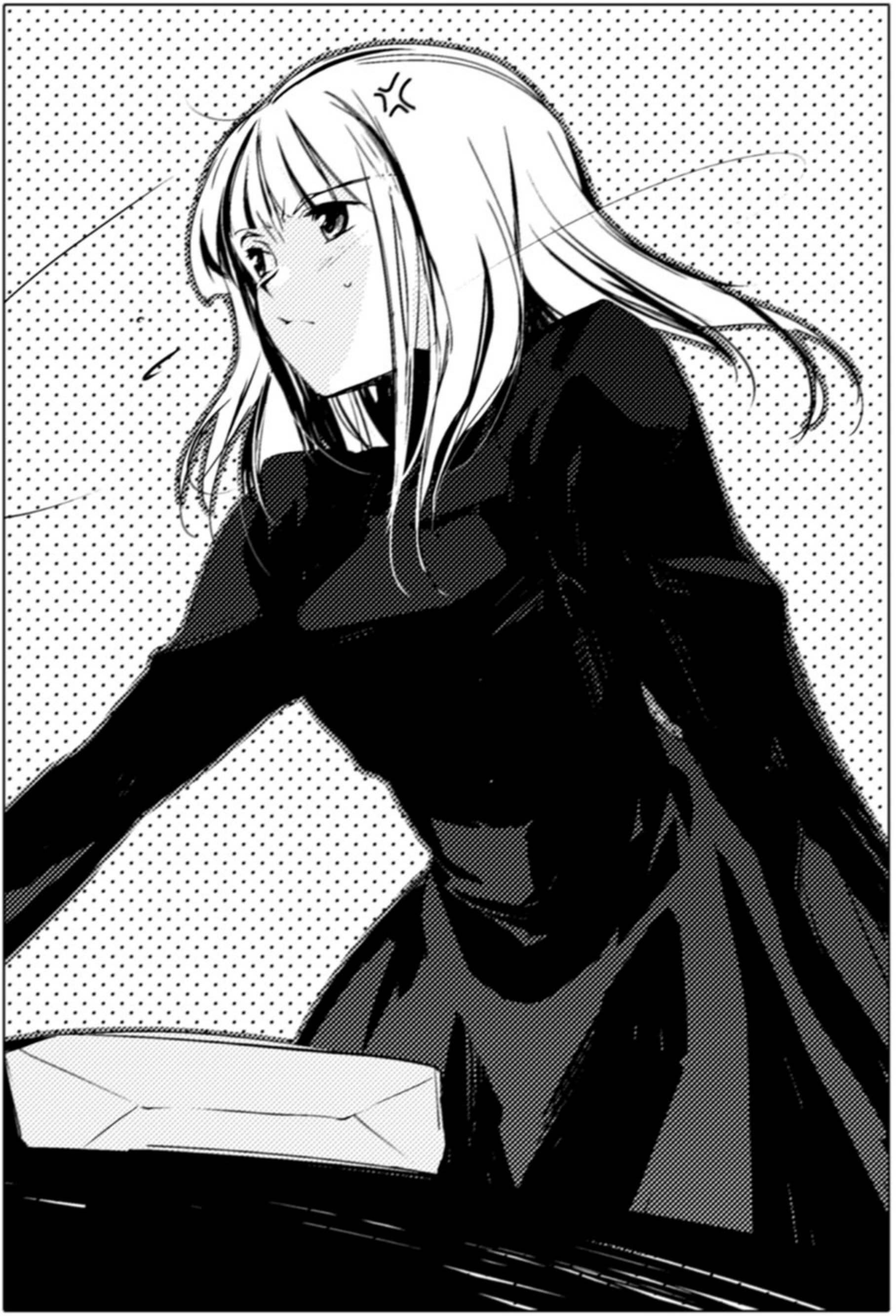
I sneaked a peek into the bag.

There was something pink inside.

I quickly pulled my head back.

Girl, what are you doing...?

In the first place, how dare Tokiya confuse me like that all of a sudden!



I started to calm down and my disturbance was replaced by anger.

Is he watching me and having a good laugh...?

Ah! That's it! That must be it!

And I was so silly as to act like this right before his eyes...

"How careless of me."

I shot a gaze around the room, searching for any signs of Tokiya.

...I didn't find anything.

Just in case, I also took a look at the shop, but with the lights turned off, there was only an absolute stillness. I peeked out of the window, but of course did not find anyone. I also checked the kitchen and the restroom, but remained unsuccessful.

What else is this supposed to mean, then?

Is it by any chance really a present?

"....."

With a deep breath, I made up my mind and opened the bag.

Inside was a dress. A sleeveless dress with lots of frills . Its color was... not black (my favorite color), but pink.

*After knowing me for so long, he still doesn't understand what I like. Anyway, choosing that color comes close to harassment. No, he **is** trying to harass me.*

At that point, I remembered a certain thing and fetched a magazine from my room.

I had bought a magazine with the hope that it might help me improve my customer service. It aimed specifically at high schoolers, but that was no issue. After all, I am a teenager too. But Tokiya had given me an awkward glance when was I reading it back then.

I flipped through the magazine. There was supposed to be a featured article on presents. Making a present to someone can be related to suggesting articles to a customer. That's why I bought it.

I found the caption of the article, "What do I do with such a present?!".

"If a boy gives you a present you don't like, don't get angry! It's a sign that he wants you to share his likes! Go, jump at the chance!"

I closed the magazine.

The article had made quite an impression on me.

Yes, the dress on the table doesn't match my preference.

But does that mean that he has a preference for such things?

Tokiya likes this kind of dress? Does he want me to wear it?

As a test, I repeat, *as a test*. No really, *as a little test*—believe me. I held the dress in front of me and stood before a mirror.

In the mirror was my body, which was always clad in black, shrouded by pink.

Honestly speaking, it didn't suit me.

A pinkish frilled dress just didn't fit my sour face.

Still, I didn't put the dress away.

It was a present from Tokiya.

The first one ever.

Nothing like this had happened before.

I hadn't even dreamed of it.

People—namely Tokiya—often say that I have no feelings, but that's not true. I merely have trouble showing them, but naturally I do have feelings, and my heart is as sensitive as everyone else's.

To the extent that I get a little excited when I suddenly receive a present.

The incident occurred the day before yesterday.

Right after I had arrived at the shop for my shift, I switched with Saki so she could go do some shopping.

Towako-san was away making her purchases.

Alone and bored, I went to the living room to watch TV, since there wasn't going to be a customer anyway.

But then something caught my eye.

It was a wallet. A normal brown leather wallet like you can get at any store. Knowing that Saki's was black, I supposed that it was Towako-sans'.

Dumbfounded how she could forget her wallet when she was making purchases, I took a peek at its contents. It was completely empty; no credit cards or cash slips even, let alone money.

Apparently, she had bought a new one and left the old one here.

It just so happened that the coin pocket of my worn-out wallet had gotten a hole just that day and had become useless.

I decided to borrow Towako-san's old wallet until I bought myself a new one. I didn't see why I should not use it if she didn't need it anymore.

After switching all my money and things like my video rental membership card, I stuffed the wallet away in my pocket.

The shop closed for the day and I received my wage from Saki. On my way home, I went to a convenience store and bought myself a few things like a microwave dinner.

The change I had left would be barely sufficient for my lunch the next day.

On the next day.

I found my wallet empty.

The cards were still there. But the change that should have been there had disappeared.

I hadn't noticed until I was at the checkout of a convenience store I had dropped by on my way to school

, wanting to buy a canned coffee. The embarrassment that came with returning the coffee because I had no money was beyond description.

Most likely, I had dropped it the day before somewhere. Or perhaps I had forgotten to accept the change. It was a shame that this happened when I had only just swapped out my broken wallet.

But the real crying shame was the amount of money I had lost. The money that had been there from the beginning plus the change would have made about 800 yen[2].

That day, I was forced to go without the sole luxury granted to me: a canned coffee.

Of course, no lunch for me, either.

Despite having eaten two several-day-old buns in the morning, I felt hungry already.

After I had suffered through the lunch break while being teased by my classmates, I headed to the shop.

I tried to get my hands on some leftovers by explaining to Saki that I had dropped my money, thus

hadn't eaten anything, but on that day of all days, there was nothing left.

I'm completely out of luck.

I bore through my shift while enduring my empty stomach, and earned my wage. On my way home, I dropped by the convenience store again and bought another microwave dinner and some new buns for breakfast. At last I got something to eat.

I accepted my change and put it carefully into my wallet, checking every single yen.

1262 yen. Exactly.

The following day.

I found my wallet empty.

The cards were still there. But the change that should have been there had disappeared.

Strange. I can't have dropped my money two days in a row.

Besides, I checked the sum yesterday. As precisely as I could. There should be 1262 yen. In the first place, it would be one thing if I had lost my wallet, but it's just ridiculous to exactly only lose a 1000-yen note and the coins from the wallet. That's just absurd.

If I think like this, it also becomes questionable whether or not I really lost my money yesterday, too.

Suddenly, I noticed that the buns I had bought for breakfast had disappeared.

Did a burglar break in?

I checked my room. All that was missing was the money and the buns I had bought the day before. Upon further consideration, it seemed rather unlikely that a burglar would come to steal my only loose change—two days in a row at that—and a few buns.

But what was it then...

I looked at the wallet on the table where I had thrown it.

It lay there still. A perfectly ordinary brown wallet. Yes, as ordinary as it gets.

The only special thing about it was that it belonged to Towako-san...

I picked up my mobile phone and gave Towako-san a call. Most of the time, she isn't available by phone when she is on her purchase trips, but this time, by a miracle, I got through to her.

"Mmmm...Tokiyaa? Mwhat's wrong?" a sleepy Towako-san replied at the other end.

"Towako-san, I'm sorry, but tell me whatever you know!"

"About what?"

"About the wallet you left at the shop!"

"Wallet...?"

"Yes. A brown wallet."

"A brown wallet? Aah, I see. Mm? Why do you know about it?"

"It was on the table in the living room."

"Eh? I put it in such a place? Yikes. My mind was someplace else. Please put it away somewhere. Ah, absolutely don't put it out in the shop! And don't use it on any account! Well, it's not like you were so dimwitted as to touch my things."

"....."

".....Eh? Did you... use it?"

".....Yes."

"Fool! Didn't I tell you not to?"

"That was just now!"

As she said, I had been thoughtless. I couldn't deny it.

I should have known the moment I noticed it belonged to her.

But. But!

Who would expect a Relic wallet to be lying about at such a place?

But there's no use crying over spilt milk.

"So, what power does this wallet have?"

I asked.

I asked what nightmare this Relic was going to bring forth.

"You lose all the money you've earned during the day if you don't spend it on the same day."

I don't know who created this "Relic", but I must ask this:

Are you a freaking party animal or something?!

I'll summarize what Towako-san told me about the Relic:

- If I don't spend my earnings the same day I received them, they disappear.
- Things that I bought myself with these earnings disappear as well.
- The effect lasts seven days.

The fact that my earnings would disappear if I didn't spend them on the same day meant that I would always be flat broke on the following day, right after midnight.

The fact that things I bought myself with my earnings disappear as well means that I couldn't buy any buns for breakfast, because it was impossible to stock up food.

The fact that the effect lasts seven days means that I had to live with with this stupid power for a whole week.

The effect had, incidentally, activated the moment I'd put money into the wallet and wasn't going to stop even if I quit using it, trashed it or burned it. In fact, Towako-san threatened to make me work for free for the rest of my life if I did that.

The only saving grace was that everything I had bought before using that wallet did not disappear, thus my clothes and utensils were still okay. I bitterly regretted that I hadn't also bought cup noodles in advance, but now it was too late.

But I have to say...

These Relics really always seem to have downright absurd powers.

Depending on how you look at it, I was given the opportunity to wallow in luxury for a week, eating expensive dishes and playing all night and so on, but as the money was still all mine, that wasn't exactly meaningful.

If I really were to spend all my wages of that week, I would be unable to pay my rent, my electricity bill, my cell phone bill and so forth when they came due at the end of the month.

I started to think about a way to handle this dire situation for the time being.

However, it was obviously not possible to put money aside when I had to spend all my money and consume everything I bought for me.

It's hopeless.

But hell, what an unspectacular power.

Leaving aside if they're good or evil, I always thought Relics were uniformly spectacular, but it seems like there are also some with powers dripping with mundanity.

At that thought, an e-mail from Towako-san arrived.

"Why don't you give a present to Saki for once? Or me! "

*Why should I have to give you or Saki a present? Rather give **me** one!*

Mm? A present...?

Ah. Hadn't thought of that!

After work, I immediately went to buy a present.

I had been thinking all day long about what I should buy, paying no attention to classes or job, and had decided on clothes.

After getting paid by Saki and buying my dinner, I took the remaining money and bought a pink dress in a department store that cost just enough so that I got nearly no change.

I know that she likes black, but in this case it didn't matter what color it was.

I pictured how she would look in such a pink dress and couldn't help laughing. With her personality, she'd never buy such a color. Of course, I hadn't seen her in such a color, either. Although curiosity would get the better of fear if I were given the chance.

"Is it a gift?" asked the shop assistant.

"Ah, kind of."

I declined the offer to have it wrapped, and returned to the Tsukumodo Antique Shop with the shopping bag that contained the dress.

The shop was already closed, so I went round to to the rear and rang the doorbell. After a few moments, I heard Saki's voice through the intercom.

"It's me. Can you open the door for a moment?" I replied and waited for her to come.

Those few moments were spent racking my brains.

What should I say when I hand it over? It will seem strange if I just give it to her out of the blue. She might get the wrong

idea. Not that I'm used to giving presents to girls. In fact, it's a first. No, this may be a present, but it's not a present. It's only "sort of a present". But it's still a present.

I just completely tensed up.

Suddenly, the door opened and Saki appeared.

"What's the matter? Did you forget something?"

"Here, this is a present."

The moment she showed up, I just gave her the present out of the blue.

Oh shit. I wasn't ready yet. I took a random action. Do I seem weird to her now? I bet...

Her standing there stone-still with the bag hanging from her hands proved my fears were justified.

Her face looked the same as always, but it being just a tad firmer than ever before proved that she was surprised.

"D-Don't get me wrong, okay? It's a present, but it's not a *present*. You look like you have no idea what I'm talking about, huh? Well, perk up your ears..."

I explained to her in full sincerity and complete detail what had happened and what the present meant.

I can't deny that I felt somewhat like I was making up excuses to cover my embarrassment, but wanted to get this straight. It was only "kind of" a present. There was no deeper meaning.

After a full 22 seconds of explanation, I confirmed once more:

"...So, got it?"

"Eh? Ah, yes. Sure."

All right! Looks like she understood.

"Anyway, that's all there is to it, okay?" I said and left.

Tokiya's strange behavior didn't stop there.

In other words, I received a present the following day as well. A snow-white broadbrimmed hat.

And the day after that day as well. A pair of red fashion accessory glasses.

Both of them weren't to my taste at all, but they were still presents.

I don't get it.

I took another look inside the magazine I had dug out previously.

"Boys are silly and think girls will fall for them if they give the girls presents. As if! Of course you can't hook a girl with gifts.

However!

A savvy girl might well make a show of delight for a such a silly boy.

Who knows, it might be the start of your true love?"

I closed the magazine in a hurry.

No way. That wouldn't happen.

Instead, I should consider his behavior suspicious. He must be up to something.

Most likely those presents use up all his pay each day. But why would he go that far?

Is there any profit for Tokiya in making presents to me ?

The time I thought to myself that I should press him on that matter, the phone rang.

It was Towako-san. It was very unusual for her to call the phone at the shop when she was away making purchases. Normally she would stay out of touch until she came back.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"Mm, sorta... By the way, did anything odd happen recently?"

"Eh?"

Tokiya's presents immediately came to mind. But saying that at this point was only going to add fuel to the fire.

"N-Nothing, really..."

Oh no. My voice was way too high-pitched.

I could virtually see how Towako-san grinned at the other end of the line.

"Mm? Mm? Did something happen?"

"As I said, no."

"But something did, right? Right? Come on, tell your girlfriend."

"As I said, nothing ha..."

I stopped mid-sentence.

It was unusual for her to give me a call when she was away, but today she was oddly insistent on top of that. Like she was convinced that something had happened.

"What did you say to Tokiya?" I asked.

"Uh? Ah, no..."

Bull's eye. The tables turned. Towako-san knew something. No, she was in this business up to her neck.

"What did you say to him?"

"No, um..."

"So I take you don't mind whatever happens to your ' Relics', right? Ah, there's one right there..."

"Aaah! Wait wait! I got it! I'll tell you." She gave in and started to explain, "To tell the truth, that fool used a Relic wallet and got something like a curse that makes his earnings disappear unless he spends them on the same day. So, I suggested buying you presents if his money was going to disappear anyway!"

I had thought that they weren't just presents, but jeez, such a stupid...

Perhaps, he had explained all that to me when he gave the first present. I recalled that I hadn't listened to him because I had been so perplexed.

"But isn't he quite the devoted type? I mean, he bought you a present rather than partying hard or going out and spending it on himself!"

A teasing and smirking undertone returned to Towako-san's voice. Apparently she had gotten herself back under control.

But I thought she might actually be right about Tokiya.

Normally, if you were forced to spend all your money, you'd eat something expensive you'd have to pass on normally, or you'd spend it for your own entertainment, like going to a movie. In short, you'd give yourself a little luxury.

But despite the circumstances, Tokiya was spending his money for my sake.

There might have been such a reason, and everything he had bought for me might have not been to my taste at all, but they were still true presents.

"Well, so accept his favor gently."

"...U-Um, should I do something for him, too? I feel a little uncomfortable if it's just me who always..."

"Oh ho? Did you go into your cute-mode?"

Something must be wrong with me, asking her *for advice. How careless of me.*

"Never mind. Forget it please. It's just your imagination."

"Now that's cold... But well, why don't you prepare something tasty for him? Maybe he'll be so overjoyed that he'll buy you an even better present? Two birds with one stone!"

"As I said, never mind."

"Whew, seeing a new side of my Saki-chan just set me up. I'm completely satisfied. Right, I'll leave the stage to the young folks now! I won't be back for three days. I can even keep away longer if I'd be intruding...?"

"I'm awaiting an early return."

Towako-san uttered a strange chuckle as she hung up.

With a deep sigh, I also hung up. That call had somehow been really exhausting.

It was then that the doorbell rang. I knew immediately that had to be Tokiya.

I opened the door immediately without bothering with the intercom, and as I had expected, Tokiya was standing there with a present in a shopping bag.

"Here, today's present."

The present he gave me was packed in a longish box and had a checkered wrapping around it.

"See you."

"Wait," I instinctively stopped him.

"What is it?"

"W-Why don't you come in for a cup of tea?"

"Do you want it straight? Or with milk?"

"Straight please."

I placed a cup in front of Tokiya and poured some tea from a teapot.

"Mm? Don't you usually use bargain tea bags?"

"Oh, I felt like drinking this tea today."

"So you serve the cheap one when I'm here and always enjoy the good stuff when you're alone?"

"You don't notice the difference anyway, do you?"

Tokiya, while complaining, took a sip of the black tea and declared confidently:

"No doubt. Earl Grey."

"It's Assam!"

Most likely he had just said the most expensive kind of tea he knew. And probably, his knowledge was restricted to Darjeeling and Earl Grey, and the fact that the former is cheap and the latter expensive.

Tokiya's became silent and his triumphant face turned into a daunted one.

We were at loose ends, and so only our sipping the tea could be heard.

I looked at Tokiya's present that was still on the table.

"May I open it?"

"Mm? Well, if you only open it, sure."

I carefully took off the wrapping. Inside was a watch. It was the type of watch that had a cute character on its dial . But again it was not to my taste. I know: never look a

gift horse in the mouth, but I'd still have preferred something that suited my preferences.

Why does he not know what I like even though we're always together?

My gaze drifted to Tokiya.

"W-What?"

"Nothing. Um, anyway, thank y..." I started, but suddenly he choked hard on his tea. Apparently it had gone down the wrong pipe.

I messed up the timing. What an awkward feeling.

I fetched a damp cloth and wiped the table.

"...Saki, did you listen to the explanation I gave you?" he asked, confirming, while watching me wipe the table.

"Explanation?"

"When I gave you the first present."

"O-Of course! I did. I even heard it one more time today from Towako-san."

So that really was an explanation back then. Thank goodness I got that call today.

"Eh? She gave you a call?"

"Yeah. She asked if anything had happened recently."

"And what did you say?"

"Well, I said 'yes' and told her that you had been giving me presents. So you were cursed by a Relic wallet? Silly. That's what you get from using a Relic without care."

"Oh be quiet. I just wanted to borrow it for a few days because my old one got a hole in it and it was there at the right time! You wouldn't expect a Relic wallet to lie about at such a place, would you?"

"Can I see it?"

Tokiya took a brown wallet out of the pocket of his trousers.

Indeed, it looked rather normal at first glance. I didn't care about how it looked, though. What I cared about was its contents. I took a look inside and found that there were only 50 yen.

"Only fifty yen? What about your dinner?"

"Already in my stomach."

"And what about your breakfast tomorrow?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"There's no point in buying something when it disappears anyway, is there? Therefore, I always stuff myself as much as possible. That's eating in advance."

"There's no way that would work."

"Don't say it! The important thing is to believe. Oh, that brings back memories of the time when I had no money and had to cut corners wherever possible."

Tokiya looked out of the window with a nostalgic glance. I wondered how he had gotten by before earning money here, but the thought became quite horrifying, so I stopped.

But he's right, now that I think of it. If he has to spend his earnings the same day, he can't even buy himself a meal for tomorrow because it would disappear.

"Do you want me to lend you some money?"

"No, no need for that. I would borrow some if the situation was *really* hopeless, but if I only have to pass on my breakfast and lunch, I can make do. That's nothing compared to earlier days when I had nothing to eat for three days and lived off water alone at times. For someone used to poverty, leaving out one or two meals is a piece of cake. If a poor guy cuts down on anything, its his food expenses!"

"That's nothing to brag about!"

"Thinking about that has made me hungry. I'll take my leave and hit the pillow."

Tokiya stood up and before leaving, he asked:

"Can you put some of that tea in a bottle for me?"

I woke up to an empty stomach.

Apparently, stomachs get particularly active when they know there's nothing to eat.

I cursed the faultless operation of my stomach.

But *today* was the last day of this suffering. *Today* was the seventh day: the day I was going to be released from that wallet's curse. *Today's* earnings could still give me strength tomorrow.

Moreover, it was Sunday, so there there was no school. I didn't have to waste any energy. And, best of all, I didn't have to watch my classmates enjoy their boxed lunches and sandwiches while having to fill my own stomach with water from the tap. Oh, how many times I had cursed my school for not having free lunches.

But today I was going to turn over a new leaf.

That agony would end today.

Looked at in that light, it was no big deal to endure an empty stomach for one more day.

It'll be time for work in no time if I just hang around in my crumbly 80 square feet apartment.

As I was thinking that, someone knocked on the door.

An offer for a newspaper subscription, perhaps? If you had come a day earlier, I may have signed the contract by mistake. But not anymore. You're too late. I have no spare money to spend for a lousy newspaper subscription. Letters don't fill my stomach. ...Should I really be saying this?

"Coming! Who is it?"

I opened the door so as not to be rude. Saki stood before me.

"Saki?"

At first I wondered if I was late for work, but my alarm clock inside indicated 9am. It didn't seem to have stopped, either.

"It's nine in the morning, isn't it?" I asked.

Saki took a look at her watch and answered, "Yes, it is. "

Of course it wasn't the watch I had bought her, but her own silver watch with a black leather belt.

Now that's a surprise. It's quite unusual for her to come to my place. And so early in the morning.

"Is something wrong?"

Without saying a word, Saki held out a black, zippered , cloth pouch

"What's this?"

I accepted the pouch. It was warm in my hands. Something warm was inside.

"Food for you," she said in an even voice. "You don't have anything else to eat, do you?"

She had remembered what I had told her the day before, and had bothered to bring me something to eat. There were two meals inside—probably one for breakfast and one for lunch.

"Please wash the boxes and bring them when you come to work," she said with a straight face, turned on her heel, and walked away.

I hadn't at all expected her to make me lunch.

Did she have a change of heart or something?

She, who usually faithfully obeys Towako-san's order to draw the food expenses from my wages if I ask her to let me join their dinner, and thus eventually leaves me empty-handed ?

Is this also an effect of my presents?

...It didn't feel bad, but it did give me a bad premonition.

Had she really listened to my explanation before?

She said that she had. And she said she had also heard it from Towako-san.

But if that was true, then her attitude was inexplicable.

...Hold on. She heard from Towako-san?

Towako-san doesn't know everything that I told Saki back then. Most likely she has only heard about the Relic wallet and Towako-san's suggestion.

Moreover, she said:

"—So you were cursed by a Relic wallet?"

"So" implies that she didn't know until learning from Towako-san.

If so, she hadn't listened to my explanation after all.

Sure enough, she was quite confused.

I should have pressed her about it yesterday.

Perhaps it would be best if I caught up with her and explained it again?

But it's too late now, anyway.

My strategy has already run its course.

There's no point in telling her about it now.

If I told her the truth, it would probably depress her or make her angry.

No matter how much trouble she has showing her feelings, I don't want to do that.

But I did explain it to her.

And she told me that she had understood.

That should keep this from becoming a messy affair.

And even if she did get angry, it would be worthwhile to see her angry face.

The moment I considered the problem solved, my stomach grumbled. I'm such a simple guy.

I took the breakfast box out of the bag and opened it.

There were sandwiches inside. One fresh tuna, one egg , one canned tuna, one lettuce and ham, and finally one cutlet. There was also a side of potato salad.

Out of curiosity, I also took a peek inside the lunch box .

There were three rice balls, some fried meat, croquettes , and asparagus with bacon. There was even a warm vegetable salad.

If that weren't enough, these were all among my favorite dishes. Didn't expect that she'd remember something like that.

I put the lid back on the lunch box and, after taking a bite of a sandwich, poured the content of the thermos bottle that came with the lunch box in a cup. It was a consommé.

The scent it gave off rose up to the ceiling.

A sip from it warmed me up to the core.

I was impressed that a thermos bottle could preserve heat that well.

After breakfast and an early lunch, I left my apartment when it was still a little early to go to work.

Why? Because I wanted to drop by someplace on the way. Namely, the department store. This time not to buy Saki a present, of course, but to make my own purchases.

Apparently, Saki was under the impression that I was flat broke. But of course, I wasn't a fool either; I had been saving up money little by little, always putting some small part of my pay aside. That's under-the-mattress banking for you. I had gotten out my pre-Relic savings to buy myself a new wallet.

I was going to need a new wallet when I bid farewell to the Relic. Of course I was interested in a normal, proper one that was also cheap. I hoped to spend about 1000 yen.

After looking up at the elevator, I entered it and selected the floor with general merchandise.

There was also a floor with fashion for gentlemen and accessories, but they only carried branded stuff that was out of my reach and not my style anyway.

The elevator door slid open and revealed a well-organized line of counters for writing materials, books, music CDs and a corner for silver accessories. There was a huge variety.

I took a look at the map and searched for a place where I was likely to find wallets. There was one next to the silver accessory counter.

As I walked through the floor and was passing the silver accessory counter I spotted Saki by chance.

"Hey, Saki," I called.

Oddly, she seemed startled. She shifted her gaze to me from the glass case.

"T-Tokiya?"

"What are you doing here?"

"Nothing in particular."

I peeked in the glass case as she had been doing. Inside I found various reasonably-priced accessories shaped like stars, swords, roses and so on.

"Is there one you'd like to have or what?"

"Surely not. I was just checking my bed hair."

She ran her fingers through her silver hair. There was a time when I believed that such lustrous hair wouldn't stand up in the morning, but apparently, I had been wrong with that idea. Well, of course.

"But what are you doing here, Tokiya?"

"Aah, just to buy something. Oh yeah, this," I held out the bag with the empty boxes inside. "It was delicious!"

"Of course it was. I put all my skill... never-mind."

She snatched it away from me and pushed it into the bag hanging from her shoulder. A shopping bag from the department store caught my eye when she did so.

"Mm? Did you buy something?"

"N-Not really. Okay, I'm leaving. Make sure you're on time for work!"

Leaving behind these words, she went away from the glass case and headed to the elevator.

"Bed hair, huh."

I took a look at the glass case and then looked past it. There was a sign hanging from the ceiling right over there that indicated the way to the ladies room.

"Can I help you?"

A shop assistant approached me.

"Did the girl just now buy anything?"

"The girl just now? No, she was just looking in the cases."

"Do you know what exactly she was looking at?"

"Um, I'm afraid I don't know. But at the moment, this heart-shaped necklace with an embedded pink stone is very popular, so she would certainly be delighted!"

That's definitely not her taste.

If I were to pick something that she liked, I'd say... in this glass case, it would be the crescent-shaped one here with a diamond-shaped black stone embedded. Probably.

I thought so as I looked in the glass case.

Whoops, I shouldn't be idling here. I came to buy a wallet.

After telling the shop assistant I'd come again another time, I left the accessory counter and headed to the wallet counter right next to it.

After work, I invited Tokiya to stay for dinner.

He replied, "Sure, that comes in just useful."

He didn't have to spend all his money every day anymore, so he no longer needed to insist on buying a frozen dinner. And if I prepared dinner for him, he wouldn't have to use any money, so it really came in handy for him.

Besides, I wasn't mentally prepared just yet, so it also came in handy for me.

I made cabbage rolls and fried chicken. Unlike the lunch I had made for him, I went for a salty-sweet seasoning. I also made a few things from the leftovers of the breakfast, which he finished off as well.

"Aah, I'm stuffed. It feels like ages since I ate something other than a microwave dinner."

"You never go to restaurants?"

"Nope. Too expensive. If anything, I'd go eat gyuudon somewhere."

Tokiya's bad eating habits are no news to me, but I find that troubling. Maybe I should ask Towako-san if we can let him eat here?

Having finished eating, Tokiya made himself comfortable, watching TV and drinking tea I had poured him.

As for me, I was preparing myself while doing the washing up.

While washing the dishes—and nearly breaking them a few times—I started a simulation in my mind. I thought it was best if I seemed natural, and not too concerned or patronizing. But sadly, seeming natural was the most difficult.

Like I would be able to do that *naturally.*

"No, it's a piece of cake," I told to myself.

But doing *that* was a first for me and thus quite important.

The thought that it was my first time made me a little nervous somehow.

I knew entirely too well that it wasn't like me to do *that*.

I just have to give it up to him without showing any expression at all, as always. I know that. But can I really pull it off?

After finishing the dishes, I made up my mind and went from the kitchen to the living room.

"Tokiya, listen...!" I said, further firming my resolve, but there was no reply.

"?"

Tokiya was lying on the couch, watching TV... I thought, but in truth he was sound asleep. Apparently, he had dropped off while watching TV.

I slouched my shoulders because of feeling both relief and letdown, and let out a deep sigh.

I fetched a blanket from my room and put it over him. Tokiya was sleeping so deeply that he didn't even notice. This week must have tired him out extremely.

The time was ten PM. I supposed I could let him sleep a little longer.

While gazing at his face out of the corner of my eye, I enjoyed a quiet cup of black tea.

I looked up when someone shook my shoulders.

Like a fluorescent lamp turning on, my consciousness flickered for a moment and eventually became clear.

Oh? What have I been doing again?

That was the first thought that crossed my clearing mind.

"You were sleeping!"

I turned my face 90 degrees upwards in the direction I heard the voice and discovered Tokiya's face.

"I was asleep, too?"

"Yeah, I also woke up just now. Looks like we had quite the long nap."

I incidentally cast a glance at the clock. It was almost midnight. So I had been asleep for nearly two hours. As it seemed, Tokiya wasn't the only one who was tired. Mental fatigue, perhaps?

"Mkay, I guess it's time to leave," he said and stood up .

Mm? Didn't I want to do something before falling asleep?

"Ah. The present," I said.

"Mm...?"

"Here."

I held a bag, which I had hidden under the table, out to Tokiya.

Because I was still drowsy, I handed it over to him quickly and without caring about any of the simulations I had made beforehand.

But perhaps, that made me seem natural.

"A present? For me?"

"Yes. But it's just a wallet. A black one!"

I revealed what was inside. Somehow I didn't want him to get his expectations up before opening the box.

Choosing a wallet had turned out to be a difficult task.

It was an endless cycle of picking up wallets and putting them down again, while pondering which might

suit his tastes the best. It came as a surprise to me that it's so hard to select a present for someone.

I wondered if Tokiya also went through all this to select my presents.

"A wallet?"

"Yes! Your old one has got a hole, right? I thought you'd need one as soon as you stop using the Relic wallet."

"Will come in handy, thanks! All right, and this is from me."

Our situations reversed as he gave *me* a bag.

Inside was a small cube with a black wrapping and a silver ribbon around it. It seemed to be a present.

"Is this for me?"

"But this is a true present now."

"What's that supposed to mean? Mine is a true present just as well!"

I untied the ribbon and carefully undid the wrapping. Inside the box was a crescent-shaped pendant with a diamond-shaped black stone embedded.

"This..."

"I thought that it would probably suit you..."

Back then I had indeed been looking at that pendant.

On my return from buying Tokiya's wallet, a glass case in a silver accessory store happened to catch my eye. Inside was a range of different accessories. But only that pendant drew my interest.

All his presents so far hadn't been to my taste, but this one was a bull's eye.

Suddenly, the pendulum clock chimed midnight.

"Midnight? So it's finally over," he muttered.

Tokiya's curse had just been lifted.

He took out the Relic wallet, took out its contents, and hatefully said, "You caused me a lot of trouble!"

After putting it on a shelf, he unboxed the one I had given him. It was a folding black leather wallet.

He then put his money into his new wallet.

He has used it right away.

Somehow I was happy to see that he used the present I had given to him.

Perhaps, giving presents feels better than receiving presents.

That might be why we give gifts.

It might seem obvious to most, but to me it was a big discovery.

"Wait a moment," I said and went into the next room and closed the door.

The presents I had received from Tokiya were stored there. Namely, the pink dress, the white hat, the red glasses, and the picture watch.

None of them suited my taste. I hadn't worn nor used any of them.

However.

I hadn't realised that the recipient using a present made such a pleasant feeling for the one who gave it.

I put them on as fast as I could.

With a deep breath I made up my mind in front of the door and stepped into the other room, showing myself to Tokiya.

Tokiya looked at me with a surprised face.

While I had once held the pink dress in front of me, I had never actually worn it. And because there was no mirror, I had no idea how it looked on me.

I felt the blood rise to my face.

I was sure it didn't really suit me, but I didn't know what he thought of it.

"What do you say?" I asked reluctantly.

He answered,

"Why are you wearing that?!"

"......Eh?"

I didn't quite understand.

They were all presents he had given me.

A pink dress. A white hat. A pair of red glasses. A picture watch.

Each was a present from him.

"So you didn't pay attention after all, did you?"

"Eh?"

"I'm going to repeat once more what I said back then, so listen."

After this introduction, he reproduced the explanation he had given me during those 22 blanked-out seconds.

"D-Don't get me wrong, okay? It's a present, but it's not a present. You look like you have no idea what I'm talking about, huh? Well, perk up your ears! To tell you the truth , I happen to be under the effect of a strange Relic.

Something like a curse. It's an absurd curse that makes my money disappear if I don't use it on the same day as I earned it. And the nasty thing about this curse is that it also makes everything disappear that I bought for myself . In short, nothing remains. Therefore, this is not a present. It's only kind of a present, and I'll have you return it to me afterwards. This is a present for you, but you have to give it back to me later. Got it?"

That is what I had told her back then, and at the same time it's the strategy that I had worked out.

In other words, in order to spend all your money and still make no loss, you just have to give it to someone as a present and reclaim it when the curse is lifted.

I was going to return those things, claiming that they didn't fit or that they didn't suit my taste. To be sure, I only chose trustworthy shops that would let you return the goods within a week. Since returning everything at the same shop was unreasonable, I went through the trouble of switching shops every day. As a result, the type of item also changed.

In the worst case, I could sell them as used goods. That would mean some loss, but it was still better than losing everything.

It was a splendid idea based on taking advantage of presents.

"So that was it what you were doing..."

"Yeah! But I did explain it to you and I even asked if you understood! Oka...?"

I retreated into my room without listening.

After switching on the light I took a look in the mirror. A dress, a white hat, a pair of red glasses, a picture watch—in there was a Saki wearing things that didn't suit her at all.

I felt like laughing. But I couldn't.

I doffed the white hat, removed the picture watch, took off the red glasses, stepped out of the pink dress and regained my usual appearance.

Then I put them back into their boxes.

They are going to find someone they suit better.

I left the room and gave them back to Tokiya.

"Please don't be angry because I wore them, okay?"

"No, of course not."

After that, I saw him to the door. Tokiya suddenly patted one of his pockets in which he had put his new wallet.

"Ah, and thanks for the wallet!"

"Don't mention it."

With an uneasy face, he added, "You can have them if you insist?" and returned the bag with the presents to my hands.

"——!"

I thrust the has-been presents back at him with all my strength and shut the door.

Losing all my energy, I sank down against the outside door.

What am I doing?

What have I been expecting?

As if fate would allow me to have any hopes.

"...how careless of me, really."

People—namely Tokiya—often say that I have no feelings, but that's not true. I merely have trouble showing them, but naturally I do have feelings, and my heart is as sensitive as anyone else's.

To the extent that it hurts when my hopes were falsely raised.

As I said earlier.

I did explain my strategy to her. And she did nod.

I even confirmed once more because I didn't rule out the possibility that she hadn't listened. And she said that she understood.

I wasn't at fault. Well, I wasn't the only one at fault.

But I did have pangs of remorse.

There had been signs that she hadn't understood, and I hadn't actually explained it again to her.

It was partly on purpose that I hadn't.

I didn't expect her feelings to swing back and forth like that just because of a present.

No, I did think that she might get a little angry. I was even interested in seeing her angry face.

It was a capricious feeling.

I was irresponsible.

I was careless.

But still—

—I didn't think she'd cry.

It's not like she actually shed tears. But I had never before seen her eyes so wet.

Maybe she was crying in her room right now.

As I leaned against the wall besides the door, I made the stupid realization that even she had such feelings.

I always considered her down-to-earth - someone with few emotional highs and lows.

I still don't think I'm wrong about that.

But that's not the same as being emotionless.

She does have emotions. They just don't usually appear on her face, and it's hard to read her thoughts, but she does feel joy, anger and sadness.

Today, I saw her angry and her sad faces.

The angry face hadn't come unexpected in a sense.

But now I realized that wasn't her face that I had wanted to see.

I would have been able to avoid this if "Vision" had activated...

This irresponsible thought crossed my mind and added to my self-scorn.

Suddenly, the door opened.

Saki looked down at me.

"You forgot something," she said in an evener voice than ever and held something out to me.

It was the crescent-shaped pendant I had given her today.

"Hey, did you not listen to me?" I asked.

"What? Is there still something you forgot to say?"

"Are you doing this deliberately? Or do you really not know?"

"I'm giving it back to you deliberately! Or do you want me to go return it for you?"

"...You really don't listen to anything I say, do you?" I sighed. "Why would I buy something to return today? The curse is already lifted!"

"?"

"Come on! I told you earlier that this one today is a *true* present!"

"A... true...?"

It finally got through to her.

—That, today, there had been no more reason to buy a temporary present.

"Originally, I went to the department store to buy myself a new wallet, but when I saw you looking at those accessories, I changed my mind."

At the time, I hadn't known that she'd bought me a wallet. It was a good thing that I hadn't bought one.

"...It's not like I approved of what I was doing! But you were the only one I could rely on. And you even made me lunch. That's why I thought about giving a true present to you, as a token of my gratitude!"

I didn't honestly think it suited me to do that. Nor was it pure gratitude. I just somehow felt the desire to buy it for her. I also hoped to see a smile from her.

I had noticed that my presents baffled her. I didn't notice that my presents pleased her, but I *did* have a hunch.

That's why my conscience pricked me. If I had thought otherwise, I wouldn't have had any remorse.

"....."

Saki turned away from me.

But her hand was facing me.

In that hand she was holding the pendant I had given her.

"Put it on me."

I took the pendant and stood behind her.

Holding the corners of the chain, I lowered the pendant from above and put it around her neck. Finally, I fastened the clasp.

When I brushed up her silver hair that had gotten under the chain, I noticed that her cheeks moved slightly.

Aah, what a blunder.

I should have picked a ring instead.

That way, I could have seen her face when I put it on her finger—

1. ↑ Labor Thanksgiving Day (勤) is a national holiday in Japan. It takes place annually on November 23. The law establishing the holiday cites it as an occasion for commemorating labor and production and giving one another thanks. wikipedia.org
2. ↑ At this writing, there are about 80yen/US dollar or 95yen/Euro

Afterword

Pleased to meet you—or hello again—this is Akihiko Odou.

This was my new series "Tsukumodo Antique Shop". Did you like it?

This afterword can also be read by those who have yet to read the book.

This book takes place in the present and consists of four closed short stories. The stories revolve around the incidents between the people from the Tsukumodo Antique Shop—the employees Tokiya Kurusu and Saki Miano, and the owner Towako Setsutsu—and the mysterious Relics—or the ones that obtained one of them .

In the following section I will go into each of the stories.

Coincidence

A pendulum that makes the coincidences you think up come true. The owner of this pendulum drowns in its power and tries to take Tokiya's life out of a personal grudge. Will Tokiya be able to survive the menacing " willful" coincidences...? That's the gist of the story.

This first chapter made the most work and took the longest. The previous first chapter had just been scrapped, but wasn't of any significance to the plot. As a result of not wanting to put in too much, I decided against an appearance of Towako, the owner. Personally, I think I managed to write what I wanted to write.

Statue

A myth says it heals any disease. Another myth says it inflicts an incurable disease.

A statue the owner of the Tsukumodo Antique Shop brought that is surrounded by contradicting myths. Touching it by accident, Saki...?

I remember getting the idea for this chapter on the train to work. I recorded the key points using the memo function of my cell phone until I arrived at my working place. That day, I dropped by a family restaurant on my way home and worked out the plot. Thanks to that, writing this story went very smoothly. I just wish I got my ideas always like that.

Memories and Notes

A notebook that makes you remember anything you write in it. Etsuko Uwako, who has written something she wanted to remember no matter what, changes her mind and wants to forget it. She pays the Tsukumodo Antique Shop a visit to find out about a method...

It's important to make notes in order not to forget things. When I get an idea just before falling asleep, I always scribble it on the memo I put by my bed, while wrestling with the sandman. If I lose to the sandman and have to realiz that I forgot it the next morning, it makes me want to tear my hair out. Probably, my fellow writers have similar experiences?

Present

A wallet that makes all your earnings disappear unless you spend them on the same day. The rather poor part-timer Tokiya gets cursed by that wallet and thus tries to find a way to get through these seven days without wasting any money...

A common Japanese phrase that translates to " spending one's earnings before the night is out" led me to this idea, although I can't agree with the phrase.

Always use your money wisely.

Well, there's not much space left. I'll use it as always for the acknowledgment.

To Takagi-san, my editor in charge, Takeshima Satoshi-san who continues to provide me with illustrations, the people who have helped this book to be published, and of course the readers.

Thank you so much.

I hope to see you again.

Akihiko Odou